THRILLING WESTERN

MARCH

10¢

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING

RUSTLER IRONS

A Dogie Dean Novelet

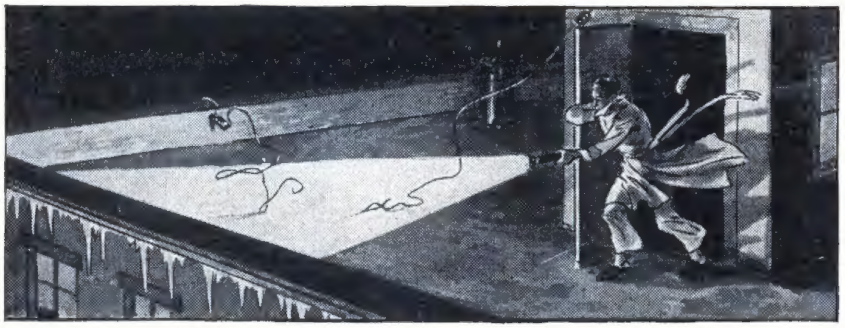
By J. ALLAN DUNN

TEXAS RANGER JUSTICE

By BRADFORD SCOTT

"I CHEATED DEATH ON A SKYSCRAPER ROOF!"

A true experience of ALLEN H. GIPSON, *New York City*



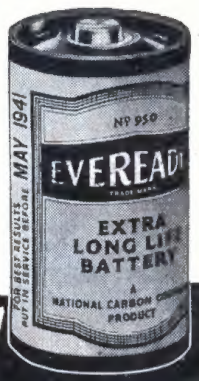
"ONE BITTERLY COLD NIGHT, my radio went dead," writes Mr. Gipson. "Suspecting that the howling wind had blown down the aerial, I threw on a dressing gown, grabbed my flashlight, and headed for the fifteenth floor roof.

"AN ICY WIND chilled me as I searched for and found the aerial. Making hasty repairs, I started back down. To my horror, I found myself locked out. I battered the door. I shouted. But the wind howled me down.

"NEARLY FROZEN TO DEATH, I had an inspiration. Ripping the aerial loose, I tied the lighted flashlight to it, and swung it over the side of the building. Luckily the light attracted someone in an apartment below. Thanks to those dependable 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries I was saved.

(*Signed*) Allen H. Gipson"

The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.



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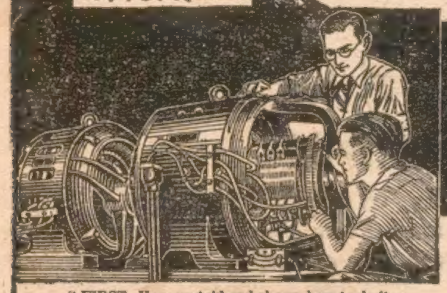
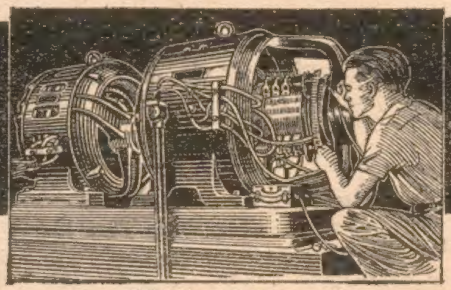
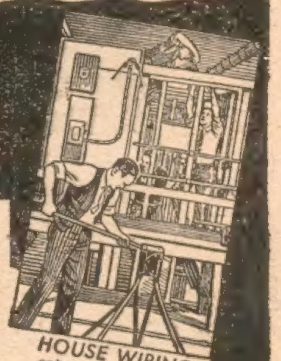
QUICK EASY WAY To Train For ELECTRICITY IN 12 WEEKS by Actual SHOP WORK NOT BOOKS



1 FIRST--You are told and shown how to do it.



THEN--You do the job yourself.



HOUSE WIRING only one of the many branches you "Learn By Doing."

WANT TO EARN MORE MONEY?

Have you ever dreamed of holding down a steady, good pay job? Have you ever dreamed of doing the work you really like in a job that holds promise of a **real future** in the years ahead?

Well, we all know that you can't get the good things in life by just **dreaming** about them. Hundreds of fellows are today holding down mighty fine jobs with prospects of a bright future. They are filling these jobs because they had the foresight to equip themselves with the **right kind of training.** Most of these men were only average fellows a short time ago, but the proper training helped to lift them out of the low pay ranks of unskilled workers. The same opportunity is now offered to **you.**

The great fascinating field of **ELECTRICITY** offers a real future to many men and young men who are willing to prepare for a place in this giant industry.

Here at my school in Chicago, the **world's Electrical Center,** you can get **12 weeks' Shop Training in ELECTRICITY and an extra 4 weeks Course in Radio,** that can help give you your start towards a better job.

You will be trained on actual equipment and machinery and because of our method of training, you **don't need previous experience or a lot of education.** Many of my successful graduates never even completed Grammar School. Here in my school you work on generators, motors, dynamos, you do house wiring, wind armatures and do actual work in many other branches of electricity and right now I'm including valuable instruction in **Diesel, Electric Refrigeration and Air Conditioning at no extra cost.** Our practical shop methods make it **easier to learn—First** the instructors **tell** you **how** a thing should be done—**then** they **show you how it should be done—then you do the actual work yourself.**

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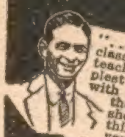
"....Everything was just as stated in literature. And plenty of methods of instructors to take care of everything. I really was satisfied with Coyne Training."
J. Halyk, Canada



"....Coyne has first class instructors to teach you the simplest things to start with and they have the equipment to show you these things as you advance...."
Ben Rickman, S.Car.

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You can get this training **first**—then **if you are short of money you can pay for most of it later in easy monthly payments,** starting **60 days** after your 12 weeks' training period is over **—then you have 10 months** to complete your payments. If you need **part time work** to help out with expenses while training in my shops, my employment department will help you get it. Then after graduation this department will give you valuable **lifetime employment service.**

Send the coupon today for all details. When I get it I'll send you my big free book containing dozens of pictures of students at work in my shops. I'll also tell you about my **"Pay After Graduation" plan,** how many **earn while learning** and how we help our students **after graduation.** Fill in, clip coupon, **mail today for your start toward a brighter future.**

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EVERY STORY BRAND-NEW

THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. XXVI, No. 3 G. B. FARNUM, Editor March, 1941

Featured Complete Novelet

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By J. ALLAN DUNN

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

Before I completed your lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator.
HOLLIS F. HAYES
327 Madison St.
Lapeer, Michigan

Service Manager for Four Stores

I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio service manager for the M..... Furniture Co. for their four stores.
JAMES E. RYAN
119 Pebble Court
Fall River, Mass.

$10 to $20 a Week in Spare Time

I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 to $20 a week — just spare time.
JOHN JERRY
1529 Arapahoe St., Room 17,
Denver, Colorado

DRAFT REGISTRANTS!

If you **ARE** called, and are then a Radio Technician, you'll be eligible for a communications branch of the service; in line for technical ratings with extra pay.
If you **ARE NOT** called, you now have an opportunity to get into Radio at a time when the Government is pouring millions of dollars into the Radio industry to buy Defense equipment, on top of boom civilian Radio business. Either way — it's smart to train for RADIO NOW!

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
in your spare time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. Smith, President
Nat. Radio Inst.
Est. 25 years

If you can't see a future in your present job; feel you'll never make much more money, if you're in a seasonal field, subject to lay offs, IT'S TIME NOW to investigate Radio. Trained Radio Technicians make good money, and you don't have to give up your present job or leave home to learn Radio. I train you at home nights in your spare time.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio, Loudspeaker Systems, Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets—start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make $5 to $10 a week extra in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. YOU ALSO GET A MODERN PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

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Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my Course in Radio and Television; shows more than 100 letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!

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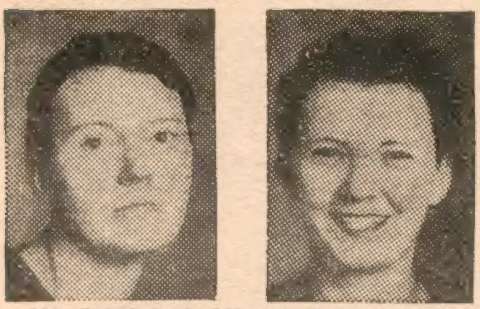
BEFORE AFTER



Mrs. Elsie Boland of Norton, Kansas, writes:

"Enclosed find two pictures. One shows how I looked before I got my teeth; the other one afterwards. Your teeth are certainly beautiful. I have not had mine out since the day I got them, except to clean them."

Harry Willoughby, Adairville, Kentucky, writes:

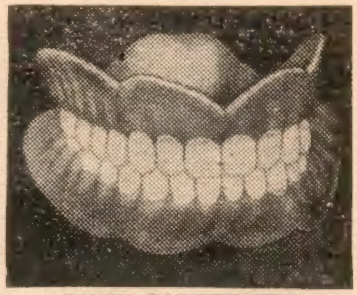
"I have received my teeth and am PROUD OF THEM."

Mrs. Geo. G. Conklin, Bridgeport, Connecticut, writes:

"I received my set of teeth. I wear them day and night. I have good reason to be well pleased with them. Thank you very much."

MADE - TO - MEASURE DENTAL PLATES DIRECT FROM OUR LABORATORY TO YOU!

We make to measure for you **individually**—BY MAIL—Dental Plates for men and women—from an impression of your own mouth taken by you at your home. We have **thousands of customers** all over the country wearing teeth we made by mail at sensible prices.



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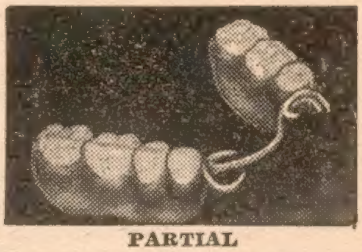
If you find out what others have paid for theirs, you will be astounded when you **see how little ours will cost you!** By reading our catalog, you will learn how to **save half or more on dental plates for yourself.** Monthly payments possible.



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Make us prove every word we say. Wear our teeth on trial for as long as 60 days. Then, if you are not **perfectly satisfied** with them, they will not cost you a cent.

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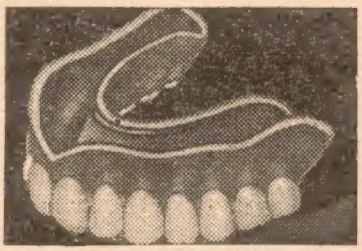
We take this risk. We guarantee that if you are not **completely satisfied** with the teeth we make for you, then any time within 60 days we will immediately refund every cent you have paid us for them. **We take your word.** You are the judge.



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—and how ambitious men are qualifying by the La Salle Problem Method

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures wherewith he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to *use* these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—one man business cannot do without.

Small wonder that he commands a salary two to ten times as great as that of the bookkeeper. Indeed, as an independent operator (head of his own accounting firm) he may earn as much as the president of the big and influential bank in his community, or the operating manager of a great railroad.

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Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. Today he is auditor for a large bank and his income is 325 per cent larger.

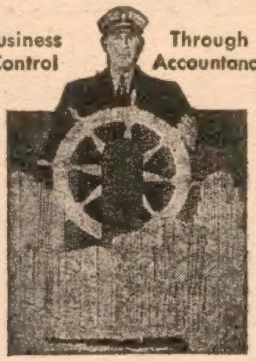
Another was a drug clerk at $30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income many times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of an apartment hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning $200 a month—moved up quickly to $3000, to $5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which nets him better than $10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you can equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable profession?



Are you really *determined* to get ahead? If so, you can start at once to acquire—by the LaSalle Problem Method—a thorough understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of those principles—this without losing an hour from work or a dollar of pay.

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Selling by mail saves agents' commissions, branch offices, expenses, collection expenses . . . that's why from 2 to 6 members of your family, including relatives, may be included in your Guarantee Reserve Family Policy for a total cost of only $1.00 a month. You be the judge . . . decide for yourself without agents to high pressure you . . . without embarrassment or obligation.

Send the coupon below for details of this sound insurance offer made by the reliable Guarantee Reserve Life Insurance Company. Don't delay . . . do it now, while you and your family are in good health.

QUESTIONS YOU WILL WANT ANSWERED!

1. Q. *Does the death of one or more members of the insured family cancel the Policy?*
   A. No. The policy remains in effect; insuring the balance of the insured family, as long as premiums are paid.
2. Q. *How are premiums paid?*
   A. Pay your $1.00 premium monthly. You will receive a receipt and premium notice each month. NO collectors will ever call on or bother you.
3. Q. *In what States are policies issued by Guarantee Reserve Life Insurance Company?*
   A. Guarantee Reserve Life Insurance Company is legally entitled to do business by mail in every State in the Union. It is incorporated under Indiana insurance laws.
4. Q. *Is a Medical Examination required?*
   A. No. But any members of your family who are not in good health cannot be insured.

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ST. OR R.F.D.....

CITY & STATE.....

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YES, just like thousands of others, who thought music was hard, this man got the surprise of his life when he tried this easy way to learn music at home. And no wonder! Instead of months of tedious study and practice, he found himself actually playing real tunes in the very first few weeks!

But read this unsolicited letter for yourself:

"I didn't even dream that I could actually learn to play without a teacher, because I had always heard that it couldn't be done. I couldn't afford a teacher so I didn't think it would do me any harm to take your course.

"When I received the lessons I took the instantaneous note finder and struck the notes right off. You can imagine my surprise when after three or four weeks I found that I could actually play real tunes.

"Now, when I play for people they will hardly believe that I learned to play so well with just a correspondence course in so short a time. I am getting to the point where even the hardest music holds no terrors for me."

(Signed) *H. C. S., *Calif.*

FREE PROOF it's fun to learn the U. S. School Way . . . and it costs less than 7c A DAY

Plays on Radio
I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio stations. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.
*W. H. S., Alabama.

Wouldn't Take $1,000 for Course
The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.
*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.

Easy to Understand
The manner in which the various lessons are explained is very helpful as well as interesting. It makes one feel that the explanation is being given in person.
*W. W., Florida.

* *Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures posed by Professional models.*

Here's the best news of all! By this easy, modern method, you can now learn to play your favorite instrument, right at home, in your spare time, for less than SEVEN CENTS A DAY! And that covers *everything*, including valuable sheet music. No extras of any kind. What's more, it doesn't take years to learn this way. You learn to play in much LESS time than you probably ever dreamed possible.

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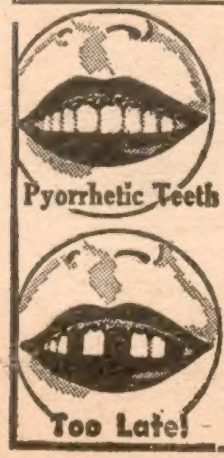

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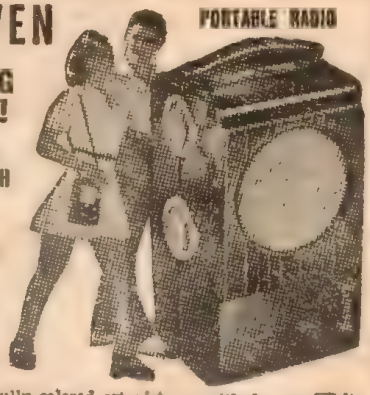

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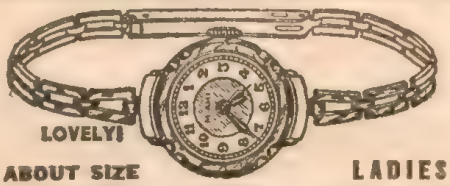

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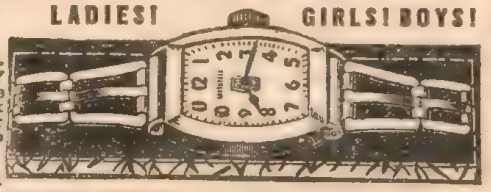

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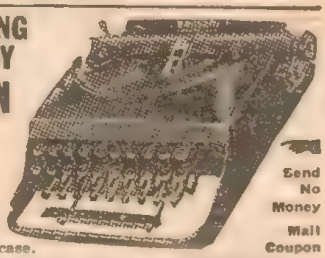

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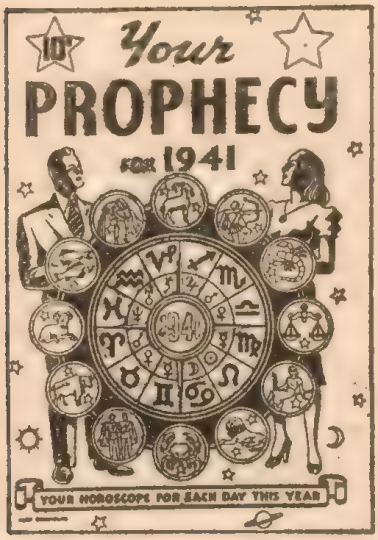

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CHAPTER I

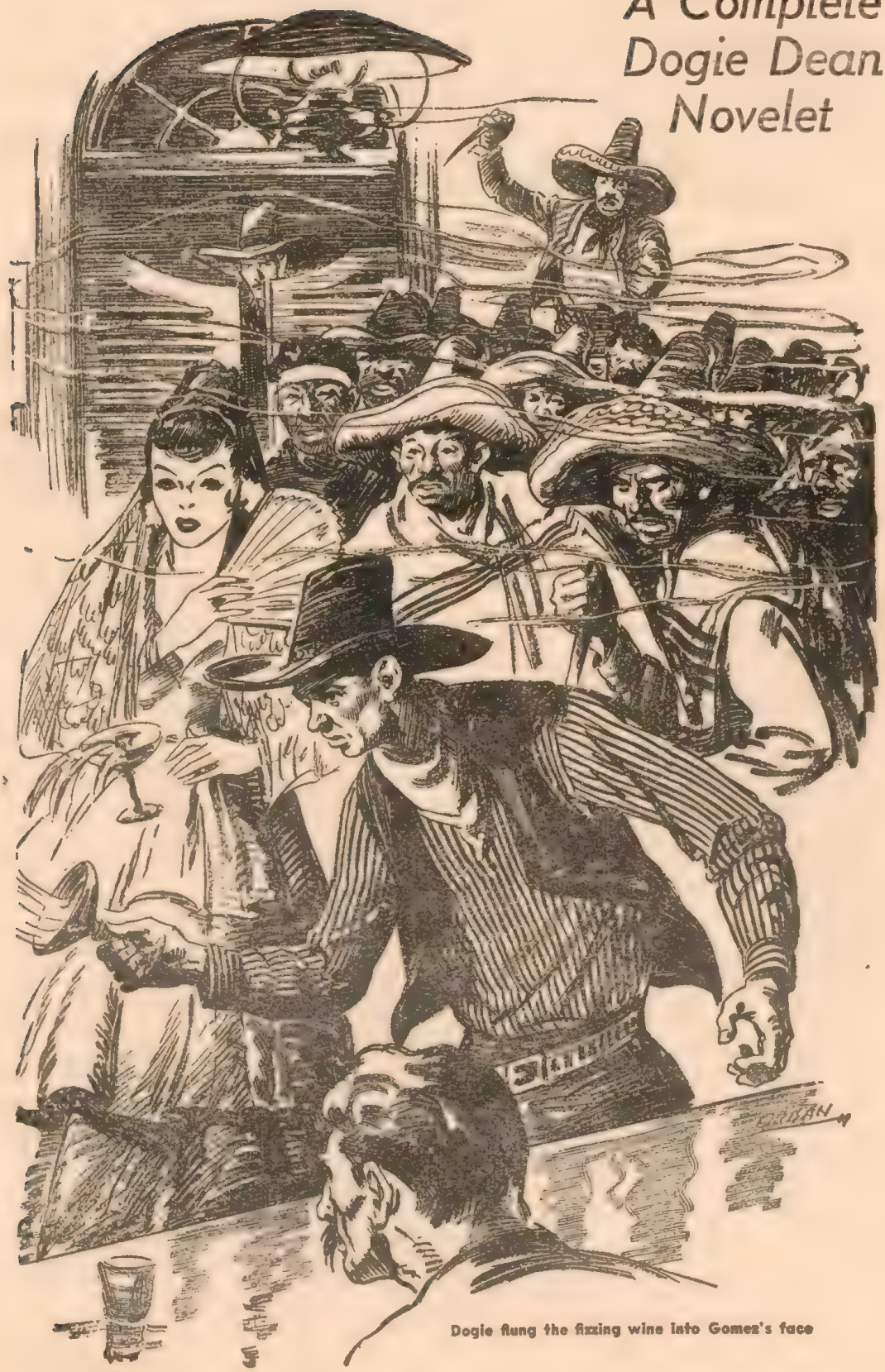
A Punch in the Panza

IT WAS the end of the working day. The riders were back, washing up at the long trough outside the bunkhouse, jesting and making horseplay. They had removed gun-belts and holstered Colts and were waiting for the clang of the cooky's triangle to summon them to a welcome supper.

This was the B B spread, generally known as the Double Bee. It was a comparatively large outfit that had recently taken on signs of prosperity since it had acquired the new brand, replacing Slash O, the totem of its original owner, Orcutt.

An Orcutt owned it now by inheritance. He lived on the ranch, but he was practically a tenderfoot. The spread was run entirely by his *segundo*, Morgan, who had advised the change in the brand, to take the hoodoo from the outfit, he said. Morgan

A Complete Dogie Dean Novelet



Dogie flung the fixing wine into Gomez's face

claimed that B B stood for Better Beef.

Nowadays, the B B was producing plenty of primes, selling lots of beef, most of it on contract to the Indian agent at the Pima Reservation. The contract went to the lowest bidder. Some of the owners who had tried for the profitable deal, and had failed, hinted that the brand might stand for *Buenos Buscones,* but since *buscon* meant "one who pilfers," they did not broadcast their somewhat sour wit, for lack of proof.

There were others who suggested caustically that Morgan was little short of a *brujo,* a medicine man, and that a count of B B cows would indicate they calved three times a year, and always had twins.

Dogie Dean

"Dogie" Dean and "Hackamore" Jones, private range detectives, had heard something of these rumors, combined with reports of rustling in Tierratierna County. They had thought it worthwhile to investigate on the chance of drumming up some business.

The two of them rode between the corrals at the B B just as Morgan came from the big barn and stood chatting to the line boss, Nick Gomez.

Gomez was a breed, part white American and Spanish, part Mexican-Indian—and looked it. The Mexes called Gomez *"chulo,"* which meant "an artful one." He was short and swarthy, with the face of a pock-marked toad and the eyes of a *culebra* — a snake.

Morgan was tall and lean, burned dark, almost bald from the constant rub of his Stetson. He had a twisted nose and a mouth like a slit in a raw hide. His eyes were pale and hard as creek pebbles. He alone was wearing his artillery, two .45s, bone-handled, hanging low on his hips in worn holsters. Although thin, he had too much belly. A hard, efficient hombre.

DOGIE and Hackamore dismounted and loosened the *cinchas* of their horses. They had ridden a long way, and men and beasts were tired and hungry, confident of the usual welcome of the range, an invitation to supper.

It did not materialize. The waddies stopped their joshing and looked at them with cold eyes and features that looked carved out of tough *caoba* wood. Gomez eyed them maliciously. Morgan was the only one who spoke.

"Get strayed some, hombres?"

A dull red showed through Hackamore's weather tan. The tall, almost gaunt Texan who had been everything from night wrangler to trail boss, before he became partners with Dogie, tightened his mouth. His gray-blue eyes, usually friendly, showed frosty. But he left the talking to Dogie, as usual.

"How far are we from La Pineda?" asked Dogie mildly.

He was a great contrast to Hackamore. Short, bowlegged, his face suggested meekness that was heightened by his big eyes. Those melancholy brown eyes, together with his large, outstanding ears, had caused many to make the error that Dogie had earned his nickname because he looked like a calf, rather than because he had handled them.

His voice was appealing, save for the times when Dogie went on the prod. Then the voice changed to harshness, and the soft velvet of his eyes changed to bronze. Dogie was tough as a sierra pinyon, sometimes.

He did not look that way now. The setting sun was behind him, and it

shone through his ears and made them blood-red. They looked like the port lights on a barge.

"Best part of eight mile," said Morgan, answering Dogie's question, "but the chowhouses keep open late."

The inference of his remark was plain insult from the standpoint of Western etiquette. It signified that they were much less than welcome. Dogie looked more pitiful than ever, Hackamore's eyes grew colder, while heat flowed through his body, made his palms and fingers itch. But he still left it to Dogie, ready to side his play, sure it would be worthwhile.

The bully in Morgan came to the top. He had an audience, and he liked to show off. The waddies showed no sign. They looked on, motionless, relaxed.

"Must have missed out on the trail, Hack," Dogie said in a disheartened voice. With the sunset behind them, under the brim of his Stetson, the change in his eyes were gradual, and not apparent.

"Yuh look like you was liable to get lost," jeered Morgan. "Yuh should wear them flop-ears of yore'n inside yore hat."

Hackamore turned to tighten the clinches. It might be a good move, he thought. The frostiness had left his eyes. He was no longer tense. He knew Dogie. When Dean was meekest he was apt to be *muy engañaso.*

"Yuh never shoulda strayed so far from yore ma," Morgan went on. "Yuh look like yuh was still milkfed. There is no feed for yuh on this range, yuh maverick runt! Nor for that slab-sided, spavined pard that's with yuh. *Vamos,* yuh two!" He gave that order with a sudden burst of rancor. "We got no use for range bums on the Double Bee, and the hogs eat all the garbage."

HE GOT a snicker from the waddies, but it was not a hearty one.

Dogie's voice was soft, almost gentle, as he answered.

"How would yuh like to take a good punch in the *panza,* yuh pot-bellied imitation of a human coyote?"

Morgan gasped. His *panza*—his stomach—was a touchy subject with him. He also was conscious that, because of his long, crooked nose and his long, narrow chin, because of his wolfish eyes, he had more than once been called "Coyote-face." Though not *to* that face. He had the rep of a lightning draw—two-handed.

He could barely believe that Dogie, barely up to his shoulder, had said that. Another snicker from the waddies, not this time in his favor, made him boil over. His slit of a mouth was cruel, his eyes evil.

"I'll dust yuh off with lead, the two of yuh!" he roared.

Hackamore Jones

His hands dropped to the bone butts of his guns. The Colts began to come out of the holsters, fast as climbing squirrels. Still the waddies did not stir. They worked for Morgan. He did the hiring and the firing. But they had little love for him—or for anybody. They waited to look-see what would happen.

One or two of them had an idea that the tall Texan, whose mustachios proclaimed his home State, might not take it sitting down. Gunplay was part of their job. It did not excite them. And none of them were keen about strangers on the spread. Deep down they were not one-sided where the matter was not personal.

There was a movement, swift as the flash of a leaping salmon's fin. The pupils of Morgan's eyes diminished to

tiny beads. He stared incredulously at the gun in Dogie's hand. Dogie's face had changed, had hardened. Now his eyes were boring into those of Morgan, compelling, menacing, glowing.

A little sweat broke out on the *segundo's* brow and trickled to his eyebrows.

"I said a punch in the *panza,* not a bullet," Dogie said, and his voice was like the sound of a steel blade on a bone. "Unless yuh want the front of yuh wrapped round yore backbone, unbuckle yore belt, hombre, and let it drop. My-slab-sided pard'll take care of it. He ain't no slouch hisself with a shootin' iron. And then he'll hold mine, and I'll plumb spoil your appetite for supper, yuh mangy, yeller-marrowed *maton.*"

Slowly Morgan obeyed. He had made a mistake, and now he recognized the fact that size and looks had nothing to do with spirit. There had been plenty of small men who had made range history with their gunplay. This one was as fast as any of them. And now he dared to challenge with his fists.

Hackamore turned toward the waddies.

"Outside the fact yuh-all ain't heeled," he drawled, "I'm figgerin' yuh'll see fair play. It won't take long, and it'll be right divertin'."

Nothing like this curious pair had ever been seen before and the riders chuckled drily.

"Fair play goes," said one of them.

Morgan was grinning, a grin of little mirth, a grimace of sheer rage that made the whites of his eyes bloodshot. It was checked in a measure by the sight of Hackamore, standing guard over the *segundo's* twin guns and Dogie's, with a long-barreled Tex-gun held as if it were the baton of an orchestra leader, ready to conduct.

Morgan's rage got away with him. It bolted like a broncho with its head down and the bit in its teeth. Morgan was big and strong, even if his wind did get puffy now and then. But he had not learned the simple mathematics of the fact that a straight line is a shorter distance between two given points than an arc.

HE SWUNG hard enough to lay Dogie's head on his shoulder with a dislocated neck. The blow met air so hard and fast it almost singed the hair on the back of Morgan's hand.

He let out a *whoosh,* like a steer when the loop shuts off its wind.

Dogie had punched him in his paunch—his *panza*—not once, but twice. Dogie's one-two fists sank in with the force of his piston blows. They brought down Morgan's hands, they doubled him up.

Dogie straightened him with uppercuts to the lean jaw that jarred the other from the feet up. Then he was away, evading Morgan's clumsy rush, his clutching arms. The *segundo* was gasping, as half blind with fury as a baffled bull. Dogie got inside his guard and played on his *panza* like a trap-drummer in a colored swing orchestra.

He swapped punches for grunts, taking Morgan's swings on rocking head and weaving shoulders. He was waiting for one chance, and when it came he took it, though he had to jump for it. He chopped the *segundo* with the side of his hand across the man's Adam's apple. It was a blow that could kill, if given full force to break the hyoid bone and drive the tongue roots into the throat.

Dogie timed and judged it nicely—for him, not for Morgan.

The *segundo* went reeling away. He blundered into the water-trough and was promptly sick at his stomach. Even then he was vaguely conscious, wretched and humiliated as he was, that the tale of his using the trough for that purpose was one that would last a long, long time.

His head was buzzing, his belly was

sore, but he heard Hackamore's drawl.

"Yuh shouldn't have stuck yore neck out, hombre."

Only one of the waddies made any comment.

"I once heard tell of a yearlin' that chased the range bull into the next county. Never believed it, up till now. Reckon it must be in the breed."

The partners rode off unmolested. The waddies, gunless, were well content to pay for the show they had witnessed by a stern impartiality. Gomez' snake eyes glittered with unvoiced delight. Morgan had cursed him that afternoon.

Now Morgan was retching his heart out in the trough.

The cooky clanged the triangle. He had seen nothing of the fracas. The riders trooped off to the chuckhouse in a body. Morgan ate at the ranchhouse with Orcutt.

Dogie and Hackamore saw him walking up the steps of the porch, unsteadily, as they got free of the corrals. The ranchhouse was on a *monticulo,* a hillock.

A man came to the door, plain in the afterglow. He was in riding-clothes and he was considerably more than half seas over. He wore mustaches and a pointed, close-trimmed beard.

They were not close enough to hear, but they saw Morgan begin to hustle the man inside, none too gently. The fellow seemed to be protesting, but the *segundo* handled him without respect. It looked to Dogie as if he had slugged his boss on the jaw. Orcutt, if it was Orcutt, slumped, and Morgan dragged him within.

"Nice place," said Dogie. "Nice hospitable hombres. Almost looks as if they had a reason for not likin' visitors."

Hackamore grunted. "I shore hope they got a decent eatin' place in town," he said. "I could eat a broiled buzzard."

"The trouble with you is, Hack, yuh worry too much about yore belly."

"I bet I ain't worryin' about it half as much as that long-snooted hombre yuh punched in the *panza.* He ain't the kind to take it, Dogie. If we stay round this *territorio* long, he'll be aimin' to get even."

"I had some such idea in my mind myself, Hack. Let's hit the wind. *Yo mismo tengo hambre, tambien.*"

Hackamore's Spanish was not so good as Dogie's.

"If that's Mex for ham and eggs," he said, "let it ride. Only I'd rather have a good steak spangled over with eggs 'stead of the ham. Hashed brown pertaters, green peas, hot biscuits, lemon pie and plenty of Java. Mebbe a couple bottles of beer, cold. . . ."

CHAPTER II

Man Missing?

DOGIE and Hackamore found a Chinese restaurant that filled their needs. They registered at the hotel, sharing one room, and saw to it that their horses were properly taken care of. After supper they set out to take in the town of La Pineda.

The clerk at the hotel had told Dogie the Mariposa Hotel Saloon was the best in town, with the best liquor and clients.

"There are some Mex *cantinas* it's best to stay out of," he said. "There's a tough lot hangs out there. The whiskey's rot-gut and the *mescal's* chained lightning."

Dogie thanked him for the information, but it was no news to him. Cowtowns like La Pineda always had a Mexican quarter with *cantinas* where riffraff hung out, including the tougher cowboy element. Places with dancehalls and gambling layouts.

The liquor was good at the Mariposa. Dogie and Hack sampled it twice. The place was fairly well

filled. There was a printed placard on the wall and they went over and read it.

It announced one thousand dollars reward to be paid by the Local Cattle Owners Grange for the capture, or information leading thereto, of rustlers who were operating in Tierra-tierna County. These men were wanted for murder as well as stock thieving. The names of the owners appeared below the proclamation, headed by that of Irwin Luddington, grange master.

"Looks as if we'd come to the right place," Dogie said to Hackamore.

A man came up and stood beside them. He looked as if he might be a straw boss on some outfit.

"Yuh look like strangers," he said. "My name's Jack Fowler. I'm with the FR outfit." He nodded toward the reward placard. "Yuh ain't figgerin' that as easy money, are yuh?"

Dogie sized him up, liked him.

"I could use some of it," he said casually. "Why?"

"It ain't been easy so far, for them that's tried to collect. Cattlemen's Association sent a detective but he couldn't make no headway. He got clubbed half to death, finally. The sheriff's laid down on the job of roundin' up them rustlers. And once a couple of rannies talked too much about who they thought it might be. They didn't mention no names, but they might have been on the right track. They was both found dry-gulched."

"That account for the mention of murder?" Hack asked.

"Some. Three other waddies got shot—one night-herdin', the other two on trail-herd. Matter of fact it ain't exactly healthy to seem interested in that reward. It don't matter so much in a decent saloon like this, but—"

Dogie was about to ask him to have a drink. Fowler had had one or two already, but his mood was purely friendly. Then the doors opened and a man came through the swinging, slatted wings. Dogie nudged Hack. They were at the far end of the bar from the door and the man had not noticed them. They turned their heads to one side.

The man was the *segundo* at the Double Bee, the one Dogie had punched in the *panza*.

He spoke to the main bartender in a loud voice.

"Seen anything of my boss, Orcutt?" he demanded. "He's on a bender. Started it out to the ranch yesterday. Rode out round noon. He shoulda been back. 'Lowed he would. I was afraid he might have got into a mix-up."

THE bartender eyed him coldly.

"We don't see much of him here, Morgan. Why don't yuh try the El Frizo or Los Tres Hermanos? I've heard he hangs out in both of them places, frequent."

"I know he does. He ain't ever learned sense enough to know yuh ain't welcome in any Mex place, unless yuh're in with 'em, to begin with. I'm always scared he'll get into a knife brawl over some *mujere*, and turn up with a *cuchillo* planted alongside his spine. Thanks, Jack."

"Don't mention it, Morgan." The bartender went on stolidly polishing a glass.

"That was quite a long speech," Fowler remarked to Dogie and Hackamore. "That was Morgan of the Bee Bee. *Segundo*. Might as well be foreman or complete boss. This Orcutt got the ranch left to him. Come out from the East and stayed. Some say because he got in some trouble back there, some because he's got a right bad lung. He don't know a hackamore from a hole in the ground. Doubt if he wants to, long as Morgan makes the outfit pay."

"What kind of lookin' hombre is this Orcutt?" asked Dogie.

"Regular dude. Got pointed chin whiskers, trimmed close, wears checked coat and vest, and butterfly

ridin' pants. He's been playin' round a dance gal down to the Tres Hermanos. Calls herself Carmencita, dances the fandango when they have a *baile*. She's prob'ly married to a greaser. Wouldn't have no use for a gringo like Orcutt, outside his money."

Dogie introduced the subject of drinks, and they had three rounds, buying in turn. It left Fowler a bit muzzy and he went to sleep at a corner table. Dogie and Hackamore, who could both hold their liquor, went out into the night.

"Did yuh notice them brands on the poster, Dogie?" Hackamore asked.

"Shore did, Hack. There was the IL, Two Bar, FR, and PE, besides the Double Bee. Likewise I see Orcutt's name on the list of subscribers to the reward. What else did yuh notice, Hack?"

"All them brands was made to order to fake into Double B."

"Good for you, Hack. Or yuh might say Double Bee was made to order for *them* to fit into. Almost as if, when that brand was registered, it had been made up by somebody who recognized the opportunity."

"Meanin' Orcutt, Dogie?"

"More likely Morgan. Orcutt seems to have been the sucker. I don't believe for a minute that Morgan suspects we saw him with Orcutt on the porch, or he wouldn't lie about Orcutt's gettin' drunk and leavin' the ranch round noon. Mebbe Orcutt was drunk. Shore looked it on the porch. And Morgan planned to bring him into town, have him hauled in, mebbe, and give out the idea Orcutt made it of his own free will and power. It jest don't smell good to me, Hack. Morgan had some reason in lyin'."

"Morgan was shore handlin' him when we saw him out to the ranch like it was Morgan owned the spread," said Hack. "What do yuh figger on doin'?"

"Jest take a look-see. Things may link up. We might run across Orcutt, or get trace of him. Suppose you take this El Erizo *cantina*, Hack, and I'll tackle Los Tres Hermanos. Either of us don't strike anything, he trails over to the other place. I'd like to get a look-see at Carmencita. . . . Don't get pricked none over to the Hedgehog, Hack."

Hackamore had not known *"el erizo"* meant "hedgehog" until Dogie said so. He did know *"los tres hermanos"* meant "the three brothers." But he did not have any snappy backfire. He merely grinned, and crossed the dusty street. Dogie kept on to the other *cantina*, where Carmencita danced the fandango. It seemed the likelier place.

THERE was something wrong about the Double Bee, something phony about the way Morgan hustled the owner. Dogie had begun to have his own ideas on the subject, and he figured on cultivating the hunch by seeing something of Orcutt and his tenderfoot, drunken ways. If the man was really sick, and knew himself pretty far gone, Dogie could find some excuse for him. But not for Morgan. Morgan should have at least steered him clear of the Carmencitas and the *cantinas*. He might not want to . . .

Los Tres Hermanos was a blaze of light, loud with talk and laughter and music. There was no fandango announced for that night, but the dance-hall, where the orchestra played on a platform, was crowded. That was in the rear, beyond a wide archway. The games were going strong, the bar was jammed.

Dogie spotted two or three waddies, full of red-eye, but jolly. The rest of the clients were Mexes, full-bloods —so-called—and breeds with a lot of Indian in their makeup. It was a lively crowd, that could get tough swiftly and that thought little of knifeplay and blood-letting.

Nobody seemed to notice Dogie as he bought a stack of chips and started to play faro, speaking Spanish, to be

less conspicuous. He saw nothing of Morgan at first, but kept his ears open to try and learn something more about him and about Orcutt.

He played the paint cards, and he was doing well when the music stopped and the dancers trooped for the bar and small tables, the girls being bought drinks, from which they took a percentage.

Dogie felt a touch on his elbow. He turned to see a Mex girl in a low-necked satin gown of bright yellow, artificial red flowers at her breast and behind her ear. She wore a high comb and a mantilla. In a bold fashion she was handsome. Equally, she was used to this sort of place. She raised her heavily mascaraed eyelashes.

"Chico," she said. *"Habla usted el Español?"*

She appeared delighted when Dogie replied in her own tongue, and she flattered him for his pronunciation and fluency. Dogie did not mind being called *"chico."* It was more or less a jibe at his size, but he was as tall as most Mexes anyway. He guessed what the girl was after—a drink from him, the stranger—and he sensed something more than that, not at all connected with any fascination she might pretend he had for her.

Dogie did not have much time for women. He was inclined to be girl-shy with the nice ones. Not with this kind.

"You will buy something for Carmencita to drink, no?" the girl asked. "She is so thirsty, Carmencita. It is hot to dance with men you do not know, or care for."

Dogie's sixth sense grew stronger. So this was Carmencita, the dancer Orcutt was pursuing, or supposed to be pursuing. He might find out things from her, if he went at it carefully. On the other hand, it seemed a stressed coincidence that Carmencita should have arrived on the scene so soon. She had a certain charm, but there was something calculating about it.

"Of course," he said. "What'll it be?"

SHE did not answer until they had reached the bar. The Mex girl spoke to some men and they made a place for them.

"The same, Miguel," said the dancer languidly to the barkeep, and added to Dogie: "I never drink anything but champagne, of course."

After all, it was the house's money. Dogie put down his winnings. Chips were currency at the bar.

"The best yuh have," he said.

And then he saw Morgan.

Dogie was about midway at the bar, the *segundo* of the Double Bee was near the end, by the dancehall. Morgan showed no sign of recognition, but his coyote features had a sardonic look of anticipated amusement.

Dogie knew instantly that this was some sort of job, that Morgan had sent the girl to him. He waited for the next play, while the barkeep eased out the exploding cork, poured the cheap fizz into the glasses.

Dogie knew he might be in a tight spot. It seemed to him as if they all knew something was going on, and their attitude was not friendly. The few waddies were filled to the guards, and could be of no help.

Morgan suddenly showed the end of his tongue between his teeth, laughing, as a wolf laughs, before it licks its chops over a meal. Dogie could not punch Morgan in the *panza* here. Hack was not here to side him. If it came to a fight he might use his gun, but he would not last long. It would be lead against steel, stabbed or thrown.

Morgan was in the background this time, likely to stay there, but Morgan was back of whatever was going to happen, and was sure of the outcome. He was going to get even for that licking he had taken in front of his riders, the men he ruthlessly hired and fired.

The girl who called herself Carmen-

cita lifted her glass and her eyes coquettishly.

"Salud, Senor Extranjero," she said.

Dogie picked up his own glass, and then he saw what was afoot.

Through the crowd a man shoved himself, excited, in a rage, either drunk, or putting some of it on. He smelled of *mescal.* His big mouth was wide open before he began to speak. His dark, pockmarked, toad's face twitched with anger, real, assumed, or both. It was Gomez, the line boss of the Double Bee.

At the ranch Gomez had stood aloof. Here in Los Tres Hermanos, he was making this affair very much his own. Dogie figured him as Morgan's agent, putting on a show.

Gomez struck the glass from Carmencita's hand, slapped her face, and broke into a torrent of abuse, before he swung on Dogie. Since he spoke in Spanish, he must have heard Dogie speaking to Carmencita.

"You dog of a gringo! You come here and make love to my wife. For that you answer to me, to Nick Gomez! You speak to her in Spanish, you buy her champagne—"

It was an act all right, Dogie told himself, but it was a good one, and might turn out badly for him. No matter what he said he would be wrong. Gomez would arouse the crowd against him.

"I have just met the lady," Dogie said, and knew it was no use.

"You lie, gringo!" Gomez shouted. "I have a mind to gut you, as one guts fish. We do not want your kind in here. One like you is not fit to live. You are not one of us. Why then do you come here but to spy upon us, to spread lies about us, to steal our women and dishonor us!"

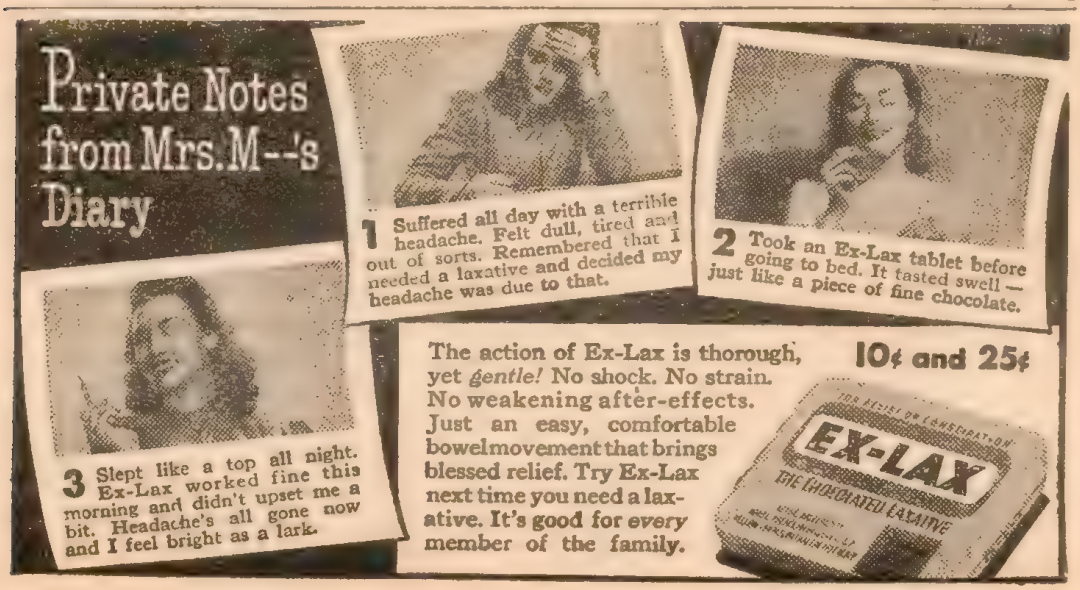
CHAPTER III

Disappearing Sign

WATCHING carefully, Dogie decided that no doubt Gomez had a knife beneath his waistband, or in a shoulder-sheath, concealed, but the Mex made no show to draw it. He was afraid of Dogie's lightning speed, of a bullet in his belly. He was deliberately trying to provoke Dogie to make the first move, while he worked up the spirit of the place against the stranger.

If, and when, Dogie went for his gun, a knife would come sailing, masked by the crowd. Others would follow, gleam in hands raised to strike, to lunge, to slash the stranger to ribbons.

[*Turn Page*]



Dogie could see them ranging themselves, their eyes filled with racial hatred for the gringo. Morgan was gringo, and so were the few waddies present, but Morgan was in with the Mexicans. Two, if not all of the waddies, were Morgan's men. They would not interfere.

Dogie had his hip to the long bar. He was already hemmed in on three sides by Mexes, triggered to kill. Only a dazzling play might foil them, something unexpected.

Dogie flung his glass of fizzing wine into Gomez' face. He hurled the glass itself at another man, then set one hand on the bar and vaulted to it. While he crouched there, his six-gun came out in a whirl of action, gleaming by the light from the wall-lamps at each end of the bar, and a bigger one overhead.

Brang-brang-brang!

The three shots rang out almost as one, save that three spurts of flame were in different directions. Oil dripped down on shattered glass as Dogie raced along the counter.

Brang!

Lead hummed by his ear, crashed into the mirror back of the bar. He checked that shot up against Morgan. *Brang!* The second slug burned like a whiplash across his shoulders, and ranged on to smash a row of bottles. Dogie had three shots left, no chance to reload.

He had created confusion. The closest men in the crowd had surged back toward the arch and the dance floor. But others were waiting for him at the door. There was still too much light from the back room.

They would get him when he jumped to the floor. The odds were too great to hope for success, without somebody to side him, to guard his back from those too ready knives.

Dogie meant to make every one of his three bullets count. His main regret was that Morgan was still in the background, with Gomez, who had played his part. Of course Morgan had pointed him out to Carmencita. Gomez' jealousy had been faked. They meant to kill him, for what he had done to Morgan.

His body would be carried outside. There would be a general denial of ever having seen him. The verdict would be that another fool had horned-in on Mexes, and had barged into a fatal brawl. Death, at the hands of persons unknown—a score of knife thrusts to his vitals.

He had to keep on going. He did not think he had more than a minute, two at the most, to live. To shoot, to club—if he still had the strength—to go down at last, stabbed, kicked, trampled. . . .

If only—

The swinging doors parted. A tall figure stood there against the night. The light from the back room showed his smoldering eyes, the slow, steady horizontal swing of his Colt in a level arc that matched the slow, steady drawl of his voice.

"Get back, yuh polecats! Scatter, yuh mangy pack. First one makes a hand-move, I shoot. If the one who covers him gets it, that's his bad luck. Come on down, pardner. I'm standin' by."

HACKAMORE! The Mexes did not like to speak English but they understood it. Still better, they translated the mute message of the .45—of two guns now, as Dogie leaped lightly to the floor and, side by side, the two backed out the doors.

Nobody followed them. They took the middle of the road and stayed there until they reached the hotel.

"I didn't see nothin' of Orcutt or Morgan over to El Erizo," said Hack. "My Spanish ain't good enough to catch much of what is bein' said, so I start a *pasear* across the street to see how you was makin' out. I heard the shots, and I make the sidewalk in a hop, a skip and a jump. Looks like yuh shore stirred up the broth. Did yuh find out anything?"

"That Carmencita is married to Gomez, or he claims she is. No sign of Orcutt."

"What's the next move, Dogie?"

Hack had never got over the fact that Dogie had made him a full partner in their enterprise. Hack knew cow critters, he could still ride anything that wore horsehair, and he was a born trailer. But Dogie had the brains.

"I thought we'd stick around a spell tomorrow to see if there's any word of Orcutt bein' still missin'. Likely there won't be. I don't imagine anyone'll trail out to the Double Bee to find out. They wouldn't get no information Morgan wasn't ready to give. Round noon, if we don't hear nothin', we'll tend to our own *asuntos*. Lope out to the IL, and see this here Irwin Luddington, the head of the local owners' organization. Orcutt may come in as a side line before we're through."

"I had to drink some *mescal* in El Erizo," said Hackamore. "It tasted like ditch water. How about droppin' in to the Mariposa and hoistin' some real likker?"

"Suits me, Hack. I got to drink yore health, for helpin' me keep mine. Yuh shore arrived on time."

"Aw shucks," the Texan replied, embarrassed. "That was nothin'. Yuh mighta known I'd show up."

LUDDINGTON handed back to Dogie his credentials, clippings and references.

"I've heard some of you two," he said. "There shore won't be no objection in Tierratierna County if yuh wash up this rustlin' crowd, and apply for the reward. The bank'll advance the money on our say-so, charge it ag'in our accounts. I figger that the amount is all right?"

"We sometimes work on a straight fee," said Dogie. "We don't expect to collect any if we don't make good, and we pay our own expenses. The thousand *pesos* would be plenty, unless we should return stolen cattle. We figger that's extry. At five *pesos* for every steer."

Luddington was a shrewd man. He pursed his lips.

"Yuh see," Dogie went on, "Hack and me are interested in a proposition out in Californy, a place where worn-out waddies, or crippled ones, can go

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and be with their own kind. Place there for cow ponies, too. It's called Happiness Range. Started by the widder of a rich cattleman. This extry money goes to that institution, seein' it can always use extry *dinero,* the way it's growin'."

Luddington nodded. "Fair enough. I've read some about that spot. But I doubt if yuh'll get back any steers. Last raid was at the Two Bar. That was over three weeks ago. Brands faked and healed, and the critters sold by this time. Them rustlin' lizards is right slick."

Dogie asked for full details of other raids, mentioning the various outfits. The Double Bee had reported losses. But none of the spreads had been overlooked, it seemed. Dogie made no comment. He did not bring up the fact that all these brands could be changed to Double Bee without fear of detection.

He seemed quite anxious to change the subject.

"I heard last night that Orcutt was sort of missin'," he said casually. "At least I was in the Mariposa when his *segundo* turned up and wanted to know if anybody had seen his boss. Said somethin' about Orcutt bein' on a bender."

"He mighta been. I don't know much about Orcutt. He don't belong out here. Seems a nice sort. He's got bad lungs and I don't know as I blame him for drinkin' now and then. But he never should try to run that outfit. Morgan is runnin' it for him, and personally I wouldn't trust Morgan further than a grasshopper can spit. Orcutt fools around with a dancehall gal, they tell me. That's his business, but it's risky. He only come once to our local meetin's. Morgan represents him. I might better say Morgan represents Morgan. That hombre is—"

Dogie and Hackamore were in Luddington's office shack. The door was open on account of the warmth. Suddenly Dogie saw a rider come at top speed through the open yard, throw himself off his horse before it stopped, and run up the porch steps of the ranchhouse. Luddington called to him, and he came down and across to the shack. He was evidently the bearer of news, and Dogie did not think it would be good news. He was right.

"I found the wire down, over by Locust Springs," the rider said. "It's cut, and the beef herd we set in there on Monday is gone. The whole eighty head of 'em."

"Gone?"

"They been rustled! The sign is plain. I didn't trail it, because I was alone, for one thing, and because they was headed for the foothills with ten-twelve hours' start. Yuh know what that means."

Luddington groaned, then cursed.

"I know what it means," he agreed. Dean, here's a job right under your hand. I'll bring in my boys if yuh want 'em. But yuh'll run up against the same thing the C. P. A. man did, and everyone else of us. The foothills are rightly nothin' but cliffs cut into by scores of box canyons. There's some sand at the mouth of some of them canyons where storm water has fanned it out, but most of the surface is rock without enough grit on top to hold sign. Yuh can't even cut yore own as yuh ride.

"By now them eighty steers, four thousand dollars' worth, are tucked away some place yuh couldn't find, 'less you had a balloon, or was a bird. My brand's been faked over. Two-three weeks from now, when the scabs fall off, that's the end of 'em, far's I'm concerned. Five dollars a head if yuh find 'em—that's four hundred on top of the thousand reward. Damn it, I'll make it up to two thousand flat, if yuh'll get those murderin' thieves, and my herd of primes!"

"That's what we aim to do, me and Hack," Dogie told him. "But we'll trail alone. If we need help later we'll mebbe call on yuh. It's the worst kind of a way to go lookin' for

stolen stock or rustlers—with a crowd—throwing up air sign, advertisin' 'emselves for miles. . . . That's good red-eye yuh gave us, Luddington. Give Hack and me another slug apiece for a stirrup-drink, and we're off."

THEY took the IL waddy along to show them where the wire was cut, and parted with him shaking his head as he wished them luck, and plainly did not think they would have any.

For awhile the sign was plain. Half a mile from the steep cliffs of the foothills it vanished, petered out completely. At that point it was heading transversely for the cliffs, and the canyons they contained.

Immediately Dogie and Hackamore separated. One rode east, the other west, bent on riding along the foot of the cliffs in each direction until they came to some place where sign would show, most likely at an arroyo or a creek bed, some spot where there was dirt enough to hold the record that they, experts as they were, would not miss.

Dogie rode three-quarters of a mile before he found such a place, and then drew blank on any sign. The cattle had not passed that way. As he loped back he met Hackamore.

"Hoss tracks about a mile away," announced Hack. "Looks like six or seven riders. But no split hoofs."

It was clear that somewhere between those two points the steers had been driven into a secret hideout. They started to drift along the bottom of the cliffs, starting from Dogie's limit, where Hackamore confirmed his partner's judgment of there being no sign.

A lot of the canyons were mere rifts that closed up within thirty to two hundred feet. Some were obviously choked with brush that had not been trampled, where not even a twig was broken. When they came to Hackamore's horse tracks they looked at each other somewhat blankly.

"We ain't looked good enough," said Dogie. "They're there somewhere. They *must* be some place, Hack."

"One I want to look at again," Hack replied. "There was a fan wash outside that shoulda carried sign, and there was somethin' about it that didn't look jest right to me."

He pointed the "something" out to Dogie when they got back to the spot. At all other places where sand wash showed, making the typical "fans" of fine grit, the wind had blown it into shallow ripples, such as a tide leaves on a beach. But there were no wind-ripples here.

"It ain't right, somehow," Hack said. "Of course, water *might* have come down here real recent, and no wind since. Jest the same, it could have been brushed off nice and smooth with blankets weighted by stones. But look at that hedge of cactus, plumb across the canyon. Hell, no

[*Turn Page*]

steers'd tackle that, even with wolves after 'em. And yuh can see it ain't been disturbed by anything bigger'n a gopher."

Dogie looked, looked again, rode closer to the natural barrier. Prickly pear and small barrel cactus grew lustily. There were blue and yellow lupines, scarlet Indian tulip or paintbrush, other plants.

"It's right purty," said Hack. "Hanged if it don't look like a garden."

"It looks a heap sight too much like a garden," said Dogie. "Yuh was on the right trail, Hack. Listen, that paintbrush don't grow in sand, neither does them Mariposa lilies. Somethin' wrong here."

He dismounted and went up to the growths. He got on his knees and prodded.

Suddenly he straightened.

"Garden all right," he said. "Been planted in some sort of boxes in good dirt, and then the sand sifted on top. It's slick, Hack, slick as bear grease. They lift this all up when they go in, set it back when they come out, with the steers left inside. Get down here, and get busy shiftin' this flower garden."

CHAPTER IV

The Specter

AN HOUR later, Dogie and Hackamore were riding up the canyon, into a left-hand fork, then into still another. That led into a small natural park, or glen. It was irregular in shape, covered about three acres, had water, shade, and some grazing. It was a made-to-order hideout, a big natural corral with one narrow entry, walled-in by high cliffs.

Steers were feeding. Hackamore looked them over.

"They've been doctored," he said. "I'd call it eighty head. Ain't enough grass, so they'll be bringin' in baled hay. They been workin' right smart to get the rebrandin' done."

Dogie knew that Hack's estimate of numbers was sure to be right. He took in a crooked pole corral, a shack made partly or logs, partly of stone. No smoke came from the roof. The place seemed deserted.

He was not quite sure of that, though, as he and Hack replaced the poles that fenced-off the entry. He said as much to Hack, who nodded. But they rode ahead, watchful, and came up to the steers where the doctored brands showed plainly, as they would for several days, where the IL had been changed into BB. It was an excellent job, so much so that Hackamore scratched his head before he expressed his judgment.

"Runnin' irons never done that," he said. "They had stampin' irons, made special to fit."

The door of the shack was open. They went in. It was barely furnished—a stove, benches, shelves, a table against one wall. And, in one corner, a stack of long-handled stamping irons.

Inspection showed that these had been forged so that they would fake over such brands as IL, FR, PE and Two Bar, and change them into BB in such perfect and consistent pattern that no inspector would challenge them. They would not look like rustler-faking with running irons, at all.

"Mighty slick hombres," Hackamore commented. "Look at this one. That's clever smithy work, and—"

"Turn round, you two slick hombres! Yuh're covered!"

The door was darkened. Morgan stood there, grinning evilly, his two guns out. Back of him was the toad-faced Gomez.

"See yuh come in, slid out the back way. Come round the house while yuh was admirin' them irons. Simple. Now both of yuh shuck yore gunbelts, let 'em drop, like yuh done to me once. Step back a bit. Yuh needn't hoist yore hands. We're goin'

to tie 'em behind yore backs, hogtie the two of yuh, stake yuh out on a couple lively ant heaps, with yore clothes slit, so the ants can get at you."

Dogie and Hack stood facing them, belts and guns on the floor. Dogie's hands were above his head. He slowly lowered them, his big eyes burning. His right hand reached the stiff brim of his Stetson, grasped it.

The Stetson went skimming, sailing across the room, struck the astonished Morgan fairly in the face.

Brang! Brang!

His six-guns roared and flamed at his hips, but his aim was spoiled. The slugs went wide.

Crack! Crack!

That sounded like a toy cap-pistol going off, but two pellets unerringly creased Morgan's hands at the nuckles, splitting the bone, making him drop both his weapons as Dogie rushed him, tucking away the empty twin-barreled derringer where he had brought it out from beneath his waistband. He plucked Morgan's guns off the floor, went through the door after Gomez who, aghast at the sudden turn, was racing away at top speed.

HACKAMORE retrieved his own gun, without bothering about his belt for the moment, picked up Dogie's, herded the cursing, bleeding Morgan into a corner.

"Dogie always totes along Sam Colt's li'l cousin," drawled Hackamore. "Shore shoots good at short range. Behave yoreself now."

Brang!

Gomez came down with a crash as Dogie nailed him with a running lineshot that smashed his knee. The Mex rolled over on his back like a cowed cur, howling in Spanish about his leg.

Dogie answered him in the same tongue, as they had talked in the *cantina*.

"I'll fix it so you don't bleed to death. You're wanted for hanging, Gomez, on account of certain herders. You'll hang, with Morgan and the rest of your outfit, as soon as the sheriff rounds them up. He'll have a fine posse, with riders from all the outfits you've robbed."

"I did not kill anybody!" Gomez protested. "You can't prove I did!"

"I'll try mighty hard," Dogie told him grimly, reflecting that it might not be too easy, with the deaths so long past.

But the rustling charges would stick. It might turn out that Orcutt knew nothing about them, that Morgan had hoodwinked him right along.

"Where did you and Morgan put your horses?" he asked Gomez. "I don't suppose you want to walk far, with that leg. . . ."

The sheriff had news for Dogie and Hackamore when they arrived at the jail with their prisoners. Orcutt was not missing. He was dead. He had been found in an alley in the Mexican quarter, a dagger buried to its hilt between his shoulder-blades.

"Way it looks," said the sheriff, "he was killed some place else, and taken where he was discovered. He's in the funeral parlor now, waitin' for the coroner. Here's the knife. A hundred like it in town. Orcutt fooled round with Mex gals, yuh know."

Dogie Dean nodded, inspecting the knife. It had a rough staghorn handle, a grooved blade some six inches long, with blood dried on it and the crosswise hilt of brass, a bar with one end turned up a little, the other down.

Orcutt might have been killed by a jealous Mex, he thought. And he might have been killed by Gomez. But he did not believe that Gomez would ever be really jealous of a gringo. Carmencita would not go too far with one. Orcutt might have killed for another motive.

He might have been dead, according to the doctor's opinion, for a long time. Killed after Hackamore and Dogie got away from Los Tres Hermanos, even dead when they went

there, and had been awaiting later disposal. A motive seemed fairly clear. With Orcutt out of the reckoning, Morgan would have things his own way. If Gomez was his agent, he would be covered by a score of Mex alibis.

"I'll go down with Hack and take a look at the body," Dogie said.

"Yuh ain't goin' out with me to the Double Bee?" asked the sheriff. "To round up the rest of them rustlers?"

"Yuh'll have plenty to handle them snakes," Dogie told him. "We got the main ones. I might be busy here."

The sheriff had sent men off to the various outfits which had lost stock. His posse was gathering. When they left, Dogie was talking with the undertaker and the doctor who acted as coroner.

"I reckon yuh got the right idea," Hackamore said to his partner, "but it's goin' to be mighty hard to prove."

The doctor and coroner agreed with him.

"I don't know about that," said Dogie. "Depends some on how good an actor yuh are, Hack. Yuh won't have much to do, jest one word to speak. But it should work, if I know Mexes. Let's go to the depot. I got to send a wire. . . ."

THEY took Gomez in to see the corpse of Orcutt, embalmed, waiting for word from the East as to the disposition of the body. The dead face was waxen, ghastly against the black hair and the closely trimmed beard and mustache.

Gomez was defiant when they showed him the body in its coffin, the lid set aside. He spoke in broken English now, in front of the sheriff.

"I deed not keel heem," he persisted. "You cannot prove eet. Nor any other keeling that was done. Not on *me*, Gomez!"

But Dogie saw he was shaken. The morgue had been draped in black cloth, the one light was dim. They took him into the next room—Dogie, Hackamore and the sheriff. Morgan was in a cell at the jail. Gomez had to be broken down. It would be hard to prove the murder of the herders, long ago. But Dogie was not perturbed. He questioned Gomez about Orcutt and Carmencita.

"That ees fooleesh. Orcutt, he fool weeth many Mexican *mujeres*. I do not mind what he tried to do weeth Carmencita. She only laugh at heem."

"Yuh didn't seem to feel the same way about me," Dogie said.

Gomez blinked at him, looked away.

"You are different," he said. "Orcutt was a fool. But you are not so smart you can prove I keeled Senor Orcutt."

"It looks that way," Dogie said. "Will yuh swear, take an oath, in the presence of the dead, that yuh did not kill him?"

A look of relief moved on Gomez' pitted features.

"I weel."

They took him back to the dimly lighted, black-walled morgue.

"I have no crucifix, Gomez," said Dogie, "but this will do. It is in the shape of a cross. It is the knife that killed Orcutt. Kiss it, and swear—"

Gomez shrank back from the offered weapon.

"Take it," said Dogie.

Hesitatingly Gomez, bracing himself, his swarthy face dirty gray under the light, took the knife by the blade. He saw the dry blood on it and shuddered.

"Swear," said Dogie.

Then the bearded corpse sat up, pointed a finger at Gomez, and in a hollow voice cried:

"Swear!"

Gomez went down in a gibbering heap. They carried him out and sat him in a chair.

"I keeled heem, but he speaks. Eet ees *un espectro*. But I keel heem because Morgan tells me. He say that he weel own the *rancho*, that he have a paper sign' by Senor Orcutt when he ees drunk, that he geev me one

thousan' *pesos.* To that I weel swear, but not—not een front of *el espectro,* the ghost, the man who ees dead, but come back from eet—no-*no-no!*"

In the back room the makeup man Dogie had brought from the State capital removed the wig and whiskers from Hackamore's face. The empty coffin had been removed, replaced by the one that held the body, inanimate forever, of Orcutt.

"How did I do?" asked Hackamore. He seemed a bit pleased with himself. He had had to sacrifice most of his mustache, but it was in a good cause.

"You were great," said the costumer's assistant automatically. "Fine!"

And Dogie, entering, confirmed it. "We got 'em dead to rights, Hack," he said.

"I don't like that word 'dead.' Damned if I didn't think I was, lyin' in that casket. For Pete's sake, Dogie, let's go where we can get a drink. A couple of 'em. I don't care if yuh make it three!"

●

SLOW-FIRE CARDIGAN, MULE-SKINNER, CLEANS UP THE TOWN OF RAIL END!

WAGON WHEELS

An Exciting Complete Novelet

By REEVE WALKER

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

●

When Jeff Cralle Decides to Ride the Owlhoot Trail, It Takes a Broken Leg to Set Him Right!

Red streamers of flame licked out at him from the doorway

Don't Crowd A Cowpoke!

By GUNNISON STEELE

Author of "Rope Shadows," "Outcast Lead," etc.

YOUNG Jeff Cralle's boot-heels thudded harshly as he strode into Buck Talon's office in the rear of the Golden Eagle Saloon. His stringy, muscular body was taut with rage as he squarely faced the self-styled boss of Saddleback.

"Talon"—Jeff's voice fell flat and harsh on the hot silence—"I was at Wolf Springs an hour ago. Some of yore riders were stringin' barbwire around the water."

Buck Talon shrugged his massive shoulders in a gesture of unconcern.

"So what?" he clipped.

"If yuh fence the springs, my cows'll die!"

Buck Talon tilted his doeskin boots atop the shiny desk.

"That's no affair of mine," he said.

"Damn yuh, Talon, that'd be murder," Cralle ripped out. "You can't fence that water—"

"Why not?" Buck Talon laughed softly, but the laugh held a steely edge. "It belongs to me an' I'll do as I please with it. Tell yuh what, Cralle. I'll buy yore stock."

"At how much a head?" Cralle asked contemptuously.

"Five dollars a head."

"I'll see 'em rot first!"

Talon waved a big, well-kept hand. "That's yore business, Cralle. I'm not beggin' to buy yore critters. I didn't ask yuh to come here. Is that all yuh had to say?"

In the silence that clamped down, a fly beat its wings futilely against the window screen behind Buck Talon. Jeff Cralle knew he was like that fly—helpless against Talon's power.

Buck Talon was big, his dark, hawkish features were arrogant, domineering, and ruthless. He wore expensive boots, a fancy jacket, and always a black cigar was clamped in his steel-trap mouth. He was cold, hard, merciless, and by so being had become a power of evil on the Saddleback Range. Jeff Cralle was only a tiny pawn in the game he was playing.

Cralle stood with lean body hunched across the desk, his smoky eyes furious, bronzed face tight with rage.

"Not quite all," he said, in answer to Talon's question. "Mebbe that water does belong to you, since yuh forced Tom Pierce to sell his Circle H outfit to yuh at a fifth of what it was worth. That hole's just across on the Circle H spread, but my cows have always watered there. It's always been considered free water, and yuh ain't got any right to fence it now. The last hole on my outfit dried up last week. But there's plenty in Wolf Springs for us both. I need that water bad, Talon, an' I aim to get it!"

TALON turned his head, spit on the barren floor.

"That's too bad." Talon sneered. "Get this, Cralle: I want yore spread. The bank holds a thousand dollar note against it. Without cows to sell, yuh can't pay. Without water, you'll have no cows. I control that bank an' I own that mortgage. Yuh've got about a hundred head of cattle left. My offer still stands—I'll give yuh five dollars a head for them!"

"Talon, I'm warnin' yuh"—Jeff Cralle's voice sank to a ragged, harsh whisper—"for every cow of mine that dies, I'll kill one of yores!"

"Go ahead, kill my cows," Buck Talon said coldly. "Then I'll send yuh to the pen!"

Jeff Cralle whirled, strode through the ornate saloon out in front and onto the dusty street. He leaped onto a saddle roan at a hitch-rack and spurred out of town, heading toward his Star T ranch ten miles to the west.

The wind was hot and dry against his face as he rode. The sun beat down savagely from a cloudless sky. He saw a few gaunt, tired-looking cows nibbling at the withered sprigs of grass that jutted from the cracked earth. Black vultures wheeled expectantly in the hot air, others dropped to the ground, eager for loathsome feasts.

Grim and merciless drought gripped the Saddleback Range. Fierce sun and scorching winds had withered the grass. The few ranchers in the basin who still had water guarded it jealously.

Buck Talon was one of those few. Talon, like the soaring buzzards, had profited greatly by the catastrophe. Some of the ranchers, facing ruin and grasping at the chance to salvage something out of the disaster, had sold their cattle and ranches to Talon at a fraction of their real value. . . .

Jeff Cralle reached the Star T at mid-evening. The Star T was just a

tiny outfit, but it was blood and heart and soul of Jeff Cralle. He had fought and slaved, through freezing winter and sweltering summer, to build it up. And now, at a single ruthless stroke, Buck Talon was threatening to destroy the fruits of three years of work.

Cralle prepared a meager meal, but the food stuck in his throat. He gave up the attempt, resaddled his roan and rode over to the springs. The big, spring-fed hole was just across on Circle H land. The roan galloped easily to the spot. When he got there, Cralle stiffened in his saddle.

Half a dozen hard-faced, gun-belted men were rimming the hole with strong barbwire. Helpless anger seethed inside Jeff Cralle as he watched his skinny cattle, driven back from the water, as they circled the sparkling liquid and bawled their need of that water.

"Thirsty?" one of the gunmen taunted him. "This water's for sale—dollar a drink for you, five dollars for yore cows."

Cralle turned and rode away, fearing the savage, numbing anger that gripped him.

At dawn he was back, his face haggard and lined from a sleepless night. His cattle still huddled wearily about the water. Talon had not as yet placed a guard over the completed fence. Cralle savvied that. Talon wanted him to give way to the impulse to slash gaping holes in the fence so that his starved cattle could plunge through to the sparkling water. Then Talon would have him jailed, and there would be nothing to bar his path of greed.

That impulse, fierce and driving, was in Cralle's heart as he rode away from the fenced water.

IT WAS still there three days later as he sat on his bronc beside the waterhole and looked down at six dead Star T cows. The remainder of his small herd no longer circled hopefully about the gleaming water. They looked like living skeletons. Those that were able to stand, stood with lowered heads. Others were down, too weak to rise.

Jeff Cralle knew he was licked. Buck Talon didn't need this water; he had plenty more behind a dam on another part of his range. Talon would loll in kingly luxury in his big house in Saddleback, and watch while cattle died, while their owners went through hell, never daring to lift a hand.

Cralle's haggard eyes lifted skyward. Buzzards circled low. Five of them flapped their wings with harsh, hissing croaks to the ground and started pecking with greedy beaks at the dead cows. Cralle watched, rage lashing at his heart like a blacksnake. That bitter impulse to rip and batter at the circling wires hammered at his brain.

And this time he didn't try to resist it.

Suddenly he was on the ground, slashing and ripping savagely with a pair of pliers at the gleaming wires. He worked furiously, till a gaping hole showed in the fence. Then, with yells and a lashing rope, he urged the cows that were still on their feet through the opening.

Fierce exultation rioted through Jeff Cralle as he watched the starved cattle plunge their noses into the water. Ten or twelve cows were still too weak to get to their feet. Cralle scooped his hat full and carried water to the cattle, one by one. Those few swallows, he knew, would give them enough strength to make it to the waterhole in a short while.

He looked back as he rode away and saw his cows wading belly-deep in the water. And he saw the six stark, motionless figures on the parched ground, mocking insignias of ruin for himself.

"I warn yuh, Talon—for every cow

of mine that dies, I'll kill one of yores!"

Cralle rode across Circle H land until he came to a small herd of cattle. Dull-eyed, he triggered his gun. When he rode back to the Star T, six fat Circle H cows lay dead on the scorched plain. . . .

An hour later Cralle sat on his narrow porch and watched the sun sink down into its nest of thunderheads. In just a little while now, he knew, old Sheriff Jim Peters would be coming out to arrest him. Sheriff Peters was his friend, and he hated Buck Talon. But law was law, and he would have to serve the warrant that Talon would swear out.

Buck Talon had said, "Go ahead, kill my cows—then I'll put yuh in the pen!"

Young Cralle frowned darkly, suddenly got to his feet. Talon might ruin him, steal his cows and ranch, but it would take somebody a whole lot bigger than Buck Talon to put him in the pen.

Cralle went inside, ate a cold meal. He rolled what food he could muster in a blanket. Purple shadows were racing across the plain as he mounted and sped away from the Star T.

Jeff's heart was heavy with despair as he looked back at the Star T's buildings, squat and lonely in the dusk. He could go to jail—or he could take to the owlhoot, to live the bitter, lonely existence of a hunted wolf in the rough hills that jutted darkly against the northern horizon.

Cralle rode on toward the hills. . . .

GABE TRENT was a fat, bald, bespectacled little gent. He kept a general merchandise store in Saddleback. Tonight Trent kept a light burning very late while he worked on his books. The rest of the town was dark, except for a blaze of light in Buck Talon's Golden Eagle Saloon.

A chill wind rattled doors and windows, so that Trent didn't hear Jeff Cralle as he stealthily opened the back door. Quickly he closed the door, stood with his back against it, gun in hand. There was a gaunt, wild look about his stubble-covered face. A week had passed since his night ride into the hills—a week of dodging and hiding from posses. Hunger had driven him out in search of food.

The fat little store-keeper jumped nervously as Cralle spoke softly.

"Easy, Gabe. I just want some grub."

Old Gabe Trent got up from the desk, waddled to the store's one window and drew the blind. Then he turned to Jeff Cralle.

"You crazy young fool!" he snapped. "Yuh oughta had more sense than to ride into town. The whole county's lookin' for yuh!"

"I had to have somethin' to eat," Cralle said doggedly. "Buck Talon must value a few cows mighty high, to have the whole county lookin' for me."

"A few cows—" Old Gabe hunched forward, staring amazedly over his spectacles at Jeff. "Jim Peters wouldn't have rode a mile to jail yuh for killin' Talon's cows. But robbery and murder—that's different!"

A puzzled gleam seeped into Jeff's haggard eyes. "Murder and robbery? You gone crazy, Gabe?"

"Somebody must be," the storeman admitted. "Then it wasn't you that held up the stage out in Muleshoe Canyon this mornin' and gunned the driver, old Tonapah Pike?"

"Not unless I done it in my sleep."

"I thought somethin' smelled about that," Trent said. "Put up that gun, boy. Nobody but Talon and his gunslicks blame yuh for killin' them cows. I'll give yuh all the grub yuh want."

Cralle holstered his gun. Trent set out crackers, opened canned tomatoes and meat, talking all the time.

"Some gent on a roan bronc and wearin' a hooded mask stopped old Tonapah out in Muleshoe Canyon this

mornin' and robbed him of thirty thousand dollars that was comin' in to the Saddleback bank. Then the bandit cut loose and gunned Tonapah. The stage came hellin' into town, with Tonapah unconscious on the driver's seat. The last I heard Tonapah was still alive, but he hadn't regained consciousness."

"But what makes folks think I done it?" Cralle asked.

"Tonapah Pike was outa his mind when they took him off the stage, but a dozen men heard him say, 'Masked gent on roan hoss—Muleshoe Canyon—Jeff Cralle—' If it wasn't you robbed the stage, what'd he mean by that?"

Cralle shook his head bewilderedly. "What use would I have for all that money, hidin' like a sheep-killin' wolf in the hills?"

"It sounds crazy," old Trent admitted. "Anyway, the bank has offered a three thousand dollar reward for the capture of the bandit and recovery of the money. And most folks took it to mean Tonapah Pike was tryin' to say it was you gunned and robbed him. Yuh'd best throw some grub into a sack and get outa town."

"Not till he goes out in a box!" said a cold, sneering voice.

AN ICY tingle raced along Cralle's spine. His back was to the rear door, but he knew that that savagely triumphant voice belonged to Buck Talon. He knew that leaded death would lash out at him unless he obeyed.

"Cralle, put up yore hands!" Buck Talon snarled. "I had an idea yuh'd come sneakin' into town for somethin' to eat, sooner or later, so we've been waitin'. Reach, blast yuh!"

Cralle turned slowly, hands rising. From the corner of his eye he saw Buck Talon in the half-open doorway, gun in hand, the cruel gleam of a hunting dog in his eyes. Other shadowy figures bulked behind him.

Then, suddenly, Jeff exploded into action.

His rising hand arced, smashing the lamp on the counter to the floor. He sent his stringy body curveting aside and leaped for the shaded window.

Red streamers of flame licked out at him from the doorway as guns roared. Thin lances of pain slashed at his face and arms as he smashed through the window. He landed awkwardly on hands and knees in a dark alley, regained his feet and bounded like a big cat toward the front street.

A squat, shadowy figure loomed before him. His gun blazed once—twice. The man yelled and scurried back out of danger. Cralle lunged out of the alley and along the street. He could still hear the pandemonium of roaring guns and yelling men back there in the store.

He darted through another alley, came out behind a line of shacks and reached a jackpine thicket where his roan was waiting. Five minutes later he was racing across the dark plain.

Jeff Cralle's eyes were bleak as he galloped toward the hills. He had gotten no food, except the few bites he had gulped. And by some bitter quirk of fate he stood accused of robbery and murder. He was gallows bait now if the law caught him.

His eyes lifted tiredly in grim irony to the clouds that were banked along the western rim of the basin. Occasional streaks of lightning writhed among the dark masses. Low thunder rumbled through the night. It was going to rain soon. But it was a week too late to help Jeff Cralle.

Cralle knew he was safe for the moment. No posse could trail him in the darkness. But dawn would bring them snarling. . . .

Dawn found him in the rough foothills. He was weary, empty-bellied, and his roan was reeling. A low moaning sound came out of the distance. The dry, blistered basin rustled in the first cooling wind in months.

It was going to rain—but Jeff Cralle had to have food. Eyes wary, he mounted and rode down onto the plain. It was almost noon when he sighted a log cabin ranchhouse huddled in a clump of cottonwoods. Suspicious, he crouched in a cedar thicket and tried to decide what to do.

An hour passed, and still he crouched there, undecided. Except for a few skinny horses in a pole corral, there was no sign of life about the ranch down there. But sleeping dogs, Cralle knew, are often the most dangerous.

The cloud masses were lifting fast now. A gust of chill wind rushed across the plain, bringing a curtain of dust. The droning roar increased. Thunder rolled and crashed like monstrous drums. Then a few drops of rain pattered soothingly against the hard earth.

CRALLE got to his feet. And just then he saw a horse and rider racing across the plain ahead of the swooping cloud. The rider, a slim figure mounted on a rangy dun, was two or three hundred yards away and racing furiously toward the log ranchhouse.

Then, as Cralle watched, the big dun stumbled suddenly, somersaulted, hurtling the rider twenty feet through the air. The lithe figure landed head first, rolled, then lay still. Jeff Cralle leaped into his saddle and spurred forward. A man could not land like that and be uninjured.

Then the rain came, a roaring, screaming blue torrent that hissed like steam against the ground. Cralle was already soaked as he leaped to the ground beside the motionless figure. He stooped—and amazement surged over him.

It was a girl lying there on the wet ground. A slim, dark-haired girl dressed in man's shirt and denims and boots. Her eyes were closed, and the beating rain washed blood from a shallow cut on her tanned forehead. One slim leg was doubled grotesquely beneath her. Broken, Cralle saw at a glance. The girl was breathing heavily, unevenly.

The dun had vanished. The girl in his arms, and leading the weary roan, he started walking toward where he knew the ranchhouse to be. He had not gone far when he saw a thin, gray-haired old lady reeling helplessly against the driving wind and rain. When she saw Jeff Cralle she staggered forward and clutched at his arm, looking anxiously into the girl's pale face.

"Is Carol hurt bad?" she asked. "I was watching from the window when her horse fell. Is she—"

"Not bad, I think," he yelled. "Hurry—which way is the house?"

Wordlessly, the thin, wet old lady turned and led the way back to the ranchhouse. A moment later Cralle put the girl down on a white bed in a neat, rudely-furnished room. He looked down and saw that her eyes were opening. She looked bewilderedly up at him.

"Your horse fell," the old lady explained. "This—cowboy—brought you to the house. How do you feel?"

The girl tried to smile, but her red lips twisted in a grimace of pain. "My leg hurts—"

"It's busted," Cralle said, "bad. It needs a doctor, pronto."

The girl shook her head, whispered. "The nearest doctor is in Saddleback, and that's ten miles away."

Cralle pulled off the girl's heavy boot as carefully as he could, causing her to gasp and writhe with pain, and rolled up the leg of her denims. Her leg was broken just below the knee. Cralle's lean face was grim-set as he straightened.

"She's got to have a doctor," he repeated. "You women—ain't there no men folks here?"

Again the girl shook her dark head. "My father, Dave Brent, died six

months ago, and since then Mother and I have lived here alone. Not that the drought has left us much to live for. We had a few cows left, over on Badger Creek where the last of our waterholes dried up three days ago. I rode over there a little while ago to keep them out of the dry creek bed, so they wouldn't drown when the rain came. I—I was trying to beat the rain back home when my horse fell. My leg hurts—and I'm cold—"

"Get her some dry clothes," Cralle told Carol Brent's mother. "Then we'll decide what to do."

JEFF CRALLE went into the adjoining room. It was the kitchen. Uninvited, he went to a cabinet, opened it. And there was food. He ate. It was simple food, but savory. While he ate he kept thinking about the girl in there.

Carol Brent was two or three years younger than Cralle, just rounding into womanhood. She was plucky enough to smile even when in horrible pain. That leg needed to be set as soon as possible. If it wasn't, the bones would knit crookedly and she'd be a cripple for the rest of her life.

Jeff Cralle shook his head grimly at the thought. It would be tough for a pretty girl like her to be a cripple. All at once, he realized what a fix he had got himself into by coming here. It was up to him to take that girl into Saddleback so old Doc Lowry could fix her broken leg. And in Saddleback a hang-noose awaited him.

When Cralle went back into the front room the girl was dressed in a blue dress that enhanced her slim young beauty. Pain lay in her eyes, but she smiled when she looked at Cralle. That plucky smile drove some of the pent-up bitterness from Jeff Cralle's heart. He smiled back, and he knew then that he would dare a lot more than a hang-noose to fix it so Carol Brent would not be a cripple. . . .

It was still raining, though not so hard, as Jeff Cralle rode with the slim, slicker-clad body of Carol Brent in his arms across the plain. A drab, gray twilight had settled. Gullies that slashed the prairie ran bankful with muddy water. The earth smelled wet and alive as it soaked up the precious moisture.

A grin of self-mockery curled Jeff Cralle's lips as he rode fast across the muddy plain. He knew he was doing a crazy thing. Saddleback, at the moment, was the most dangerous spot on earth for him. But even now he did not regret the decision he had made. The girl was warm and soft in his arms, her body covered entirely by the big slicker to ward off the driving wind and rain. He knew the jolting must be sending waves of agony through her, but she did not complain.

Cralle was wet, cold, miserable. He was tired and sleepy, and his thoughts were bitter. Ever since last night he had puzzled over what old Gabe Trent had told him, but he was no nearer a solution. Why should old Tonapah Pike implicate him in that robbery and shooting? Tonapah Pike was his friend. It just didn't make sense.

But the fact remained that he was implicated—and now he was deliberately placing a hang-noose about his own neck, just because he did not want to see a slim, dark-eyed girl go through life a cripple.

Once the girl pushed aside the slicker and looked up at him.

"Are we almost there, Jeff?" she asked.

"It won't be long now," he said, grinning. "You just rest easy, and we'll have that leg fixed in no time."

Carol Brent smiled wanly, and Jeff Cralle felt amply repaid for his weariness and misery, for the peril he was riding into. The gray twilight deepened, and night closed down like a blanket around them. A night filled with the soft whisper of rain, the

dazzling flare of lightning and the deep roll of thunder.

SEVERAL times Cralle struggled to ford deep, treacherous streams. He never stopped, never hesitated. As each mile slid under drumming hoofs, his anxiety to get Carol Brent to a doctor increased. Each minute seeped the waning strength from his body.

His head perked up sharply. Saddleback lay in the distance before him. Red blobs of light winked in windows. Thankfulness flooded on through Jeff Cralle. He was reeling in the saddle. His whole body ached.

He had no plans beyond getting Carol to old Doc Lowry. He knew where Doc Lowry lived, in a small shack out on the edge of town. Maybe he could leave Carol at Doc's place, then ride away again into the night unobserved. That's what he would do, he decided. A light glowed invitingly in a window of Doc's cabin.

His legs seemed weighted with lead as he dismounted, the girl in his arms, and rapped on the closed door. A white-haired, bespectacled little old lady opened the door. She looked over her glasses without fear or surprise at Jeff Cralle, stood aside beckoning him to enter. Cralle staggered inside. He lowered the girl into a rocking chair, straightened.

"I've got a patient for Doc," he said tiredly. "Where is he?"

"Down at the Golden Eagle Saloon," the woman said, "playing poker with Buck Talon. You'll have to get him."

Cralle went out the door and down the street toward the Golden Eagle Saloon. His mind pulsed wearily, but he knew that he was doing the craziest thing he could possibly do. Buck Talon would be at the Golden Eagle Saloon, with some of his gunnies. Buck Talon hated him, would not hesitate to gun him down.

Carol Brent had to have a doctor, he thought, and Doc Lowry was at the Golden Eagle. Cralle trudged down the center of the street, his boots slogging in mud that had been powdery dust a short while ago, his eyes fixed on a yellow shaft of light that speared out onto the street.

A score of men were in the saloon. Most of them were honest cowboys and ranchers, in town celebrating the end of the drought. Four or five were Buck Talon's gun-slicks. Near the back of the room three men sat about a rickety table playing stud poker. One of the players was Buck Talon. Another was Doc Lowry, a wiry, gray-bearded man. The third was a grizzled, squint-eyed old rancher. Standing behind Talon's chair, their backs to the wall and facing the front door, were two hard-eyed, gun-belted gents—Talon's gun-guards.

An evil silence gripped the room as Jeff Cralle reeled between the batwings. Cralle stood spread-legged, his weary eyes probing about the room till they focused on the card players. He shuffled forward till he stood beside the little medico. He could feel the impact of Buck Talon's black eyes upon him. But they didn't seem so important right now.

"Doc, I've got a patient for yuh," he said. "Up at your house. You'd better hurry."

Doc Lowry looked at Jeff Cralle, then at Buck Talon and his gunnies. He hurriedly got to his feet.

"Sure, Jeff," he mumbled. "I'll hurry. I'm on my way!"

He turned, leaving cards and money on the table, and went quickly out into the muddy street.

JEFF CRALLE stood a moment, fighting the dizziness that swept over him. The lights in the saloon seemed far away, the room seemed to be whirling crazily. He sensed the triumph gleaming in Buck Talon's eyes.

Cralle knew that he had to get out

of there. He turned, started toward the door.

"Not so fast, Cralle!" Talon clipped. "You're stayin' here!"

Cralle stopped, whirled. He did not want to be shot in the back. Talon leaped to his feet, his cigar tilted arrogantly in his steel-trap mouth. He was grinning wolfishly.

"Robbery an' murder is a mighty bad thing, Cralle," Talon went on sneeringly. "It was a crazy thing, ridin' into town thisaway. Now yuh'll go to jail—or swallow lead!"

Fierce anger at the injustice that had ruined him, driven him outside the law, struck at Jeff Cralle.

"I'm not goin' to jail, Talon," he said flatly. "Make a move, and you'll be the one to eat lead!"

"Take 'im, you gunnies!" Talon squalled suddenly, grabbing frantically for his gun.

The room exploded before Cralle's eyes. He could see crimson tongues of flame licking at him. He could hear the blasting roar of gunfire. A gun was kicking and booming in his own hand. The room was a pandemonium of yelling, fighting men as the spectators sought shelter from screaming lead.

Cralle felt red-hot pain slash at his head. Nausea surged over him, and all the strength seeped slowly from his body. He staggered crazily. He could not raise the gun in his hand. He could still hear the crashing roar of guns about him. The gun-fight was raging to a crescendo of fury! But still he did not feel the hot bite of lead eating into his body.

Then, through the fogging powder-smoke, he saw Sheriff Jim Peters. Sheriff Peters had just lunged in from the street, a blazing gun in his hand, flanked on each side by grim-eyed deputies. They all had guns in their hands—and those guns were spitting lead on Buck Talon and his gunnies!

That did not make sense, Jeff Cralle decided. Everything had gone haywire. But it did not matter. Nothing mattered but the fact that Carol Brent was all right. And to be able to sleep. . . .

"Sure, he's okay!" That voice, Cralle knew, belonged to Doc Lowry. "Don't you worry, girl. That bullet just cut a shallow gash across his skull. Loss of sleep, more than anything else, knocked him out."

Cralle slowly opened his blood-shot eyes a trifle. He lay on a soft, clean bed. Four others besides himself were in the room—Carol Brent, Sheriff Jim Peters, Doc Lowry and his white-haired wife. He knew the room was in Doc's cabin. He could see anxiety plaguing Carol's dark young eyes.

"That's fine," he heard Carol say. "If he'd been killed it would have been my fault. I didn't know—you say the law doesn't want him any more, Sheriff?"

"'Course not," Jim Peters grunted. "It was all a mistake. Like I said, old Tonapah Pike regained consciousness a little while ago, and done some talkin'. He hadn't been tryin' to say that it was Jeff who had robbed him and tried to kill him. That stage-robbin' hombre had been made up to look like Jeff, all right."

HE PAUSED, then continued. "He'd done some talkin' calculated to make ol' Tonapah think it was Jeff. But Tonapah wasn't fooled; he recognized the robber. What Tonapah was tryin' to say while he was unconscious was that Jeff was innocent, that some skunks was tryin' to frame that job off onto him."

"That was a joke on Jeff, even if it did almost get him killed." Doc Lowry chuckled. "You say Talon was behind that job?"

Sheriff Peters nodded. "Cotton Wells, one of Talon's men, done the robbin', but it was Talon's idea. Talon meant to frame the robbery onto Jeff, just to finish up the job of bustin'

him. Cotton Wells died down there in the saloon, along with Buck Talon, but before he died he did some fancy talkin'. We found the stolen money in Talon's office safe.

"That clears Jeff. An' with Talon dead, there's nobody to push those cattle-killin', fence-cuttin' charges. Looks like the crazy young fool's settin' purty. Most of his cows are still alive. An' now he'll get the three thousand dollar reward the bank offered for the recovery of that money!"

Jeff's brain was spinning. Through half-closed eyes he looked at Carol Brent. She was sitting in a blanket-padded rocking chair, and her leg had been set. Her angelic face was pale, but she was smiling as her dark eyes turned toward Jeff Cralle.

Cralle closed his eyes again. He still did not savvy just what had happened. But he savvied plenty that he was just about the luckiest cuss in the world.

A cow ranch, and a slim, dark-eyed girl to share it—what more could a gent ask of the future?

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SWAP AND WHOPPER BECOME GAME PROTECTORS

IN

THE EAGLES FLY HIGH

An Uproarious Novelet by SYL MacDOWELL

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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Poisoned Pastures

By ROBERT S. GORDON

Author of "Gunpowder Showdown," "Rope Evidence," etc.

Clay lunged to one side as the killer prepared to fire

When a Grim Killer Runs Rampant in Silvermine County, Deputy Sheriff Clay Merrill Corrals Him With Science and Six-Gun!

IN HIS improvised crime laboratory Deputy Sheriff Clay Merrill riveted one eye to the eyepiece of his microscope and squinted studiously at a stained glass slide. His grandfather, Sheriff Ben Merrill, stomped impatiently at the front window.

"Time yuh stopped tinkerin' with them gadgets," remarked the old sheriff. "We gotta be headin' over to Saddle Hill 'fore sundown. I promised Jim Wallace—"

"In a minute, Grandpop," said the young deputy without looking up. "Soon as I finish this last experiment.

Mighty interestin', these poison tests, even if they are only on dead sheep. That camas grass sure is powerful stuff."

"Mebbe so," agreed the sheriff reluctantly. "But what good is yore experimentin' on dead sheep? It don't prove they was pizened deliberate."

Clay Merrill raised his head slowly from the microscope. Yawning, he rose from his work-table and, without replying, busied himself in putting away his valued paraphernalia. His six feet of wide-shouldered, tapering body moved lithely around the room as he replaced bottles, chemicals and an assortment of miscellaneous equipment, each in its allotted place on shelves built all around the room.

A faint trace of a smile played over Clay's handsome ruddy face. There was no point, he reflected, in getting into another discussion with his grandsire on the efficiency of up-to-date methods in criminology.

Several months before, Clay had returned from the big city to his native town of Silvermine after a year of schooling in the technical study of modern criminology. Having brought home most of his scientific equipment, he had devoted his spare time to keeping up with latest developments in modern crime detection.

The sixty-five-year-old sheriff, imbued with old-time traditions of the Frontier days of the West, had at first frowned upon his grandson's endeavors. Forty years of law enforcement with the time-worn methods of the "posse" and "six-shooter" had been good enough for the veteran sheriff up to now. And like an old dog who wouldn't be taught new tricks, the venerable sheriff had retained some inward reluctance toward the encroachment of Twentieth Century methods.

But Clay had persistently continued his laboratory investigations and by his knowledge of blood analysis in a recent case, had succeeded in solving a local murder. As a result the sheriff had grudgingly conceded the practical use of Clay's laboratory work, although he was still inclined to scoff at the use of such scientific methods in a tiny village tucked away from modern civilization.

For the little Montana ranch town was situated miles from the nearest city. Hemmed in by mountains beyond which stretched vast areas of rolling plains, Silvermine was indeed a throwback to the Frontier days of the early West. Even to the extent of the constant deep-rooted wrangling between cattlemen and sheepherders.

DESPITE the presence of Jim Wallace, representative of the State Forest Service, frequent hostilities had flared up between Walt Kellogg, owner of the Lazy K cattle ranch and "Miser" Hanscomb, wealthy sheepherder. The enmity between the two men had become more intensified over the fact that the adjacent borderlines of their properties was also the deadline between cattle ground and sheep pastures.

Two days before Wallace had been called away temporarily to a distant region, and to the old sheriff of Silvermine had fallen the irksome task of preserving peace at the deadline.

"It's a cinch Hanscomb is too smart to let his sheep graze in poisonous camas grass," said Clay, reaching for his wide-brimmed Stetson.

"So yuh reckon Kellogg's been feedin' it to the woolies on the sly," chided the sheriff, a mild note of sarcasm in his voice. "Well, if yuh can only prove it now with yore experimentin'—"

Sheriff Ben Merrill cut his remark short as he sighted a forlorn figure approaching the house less than a hundred yards away. The man was massive in size, his tremendously broad shoulders and large head hulking over as he plodded along the dusty road like a huge ape, his arms dangling at his sides below the knees.

"What the— That's Willie Hanscomb, ain't it?" exploded the sheriff.

Clay stepped over to the window. "That's who it is," he said.

"What in tarnation d'yuh suppose brings that loco younker into town? Been a year or more since he or his penny-pinchin' uncle set foot in Silvermine. Lookit 'im! Seems like he's broodier than ever."

Clay scrutinized the approaching figure closely as the face came into view. It was a young face, almost boyish, but clouded with a blank, indefinable expression akin to moroseness. The mouth was parted slightly. There was a melancholy droop of the lower lip, and the pallid-gray eyes appeared shrouded with a glassy stare.

"All them sheep tenders seem to have that same morbid look," observed the young deputy. "I guess it's from livin' out on the pasture like hermits, not seein' a human being for weeks at a stretch. But I don't reckon Willie is any more loco than his uncle."

"Mebbe Willie is runnin' away again," said the sheriff.

"If he is," replied Clay, "then I reckon he's got more sense than yuh give him credit for. I wouldn't tend sheep for any amount of money."

"No? Well, Miser Hanscomb seems to've done right smart by hisself. I calc'late that miserly old jasper has fifty thousand cached away right now."

Willie Hanscomb turned in at the sheriff's front gate and increased his pace as he ambled up the gravel walk. The sheriff and Clay hurried down to meet him at the front door.

"What's on yore mind, Willie?" queried the sheriff.

"Uncle sent me," replied Willie, his eyes darting nervously as he looked between the two men, avoiding their direct gaze. "There's a fight over to Saddle Hill. Kellogg—"

"Dammit!" groaned the sheriff. "I knowed we shoulda been there. Come on, Clay. Pronto!"

"You ride ahead," said Clay thoughtfully. "We'll be right along, soon's I fix Willie up with a horse." Turning to Willie Hanscomb he asked: "What sort of fight? Anyone hurt?"

"Guns," said Willie tersely. "There's four of 'em. I snuck 'round the hill. . . ."

TWENTY minutes later, Clay, followed by Willie Hanscomb far to the rear, caught up with the sheriff as the latter was reining his horse up the craggy side of Saddle Hill. Gaining the top of the pass they halted momentarily, searching for signs of the struggle.

Dense foliage obstructed their view downward to the foot of the hill. Beyond the tops of the trees they looked out to the right into a vast expanse of open prairie, where thousands of sheep, segregated into small bands, dotted the landscape in motionless masses.

An eerie stillness had settled over the region in the gathering dusk. As the lawmen prepared to rein their mounts down the treacherous slope a muffled cry broke the silence.

Clay dismounted hurriedly, crashed down through the heavy brush on foot in order to hasten his descent. Halfway down the side, through an opening in the trees, he caught a glimpse of the bloody carnage.

He quickened his thumping pace down the hillside and finally plunged into the open at the foot of the hill, just as Walt Kellogg was securing a firm gag around Miser Hanscomb's mouth. The latter's gun was at his feet, the barrel smashed by a bullet. The old sheepherder, seated at the base of a tall cottonwood tree, was bound hand and foot, his futile struggling having been forcibly stopped.

All around the hapless sheepman lay scores of dead woollies, some shot through the head, others clubbed to death. Kellogg's three cowpunchers, armed with heavy clubs, were darting wildly among the nearest band of sheep. They wielded their bludgeons with deadly accuracy, whacking away with sinister glee.

At the sudden appearance of Clay, Walt Kellogg straightened up, a scurrilous smirk creasing his leathery face. He faced the young deputy defiantly, his right hand resting an inch over his gun butt. The three cowpunchers stopped their clubbing abruptly, turned quickly to face the newcomer.

"Untie that man!" Clay ordered hotly.

"I'll leave that to you," the ranchman flung back lightly. "I'm finished with 'em—for the present."

"What's goin' on here!" demanded Sheriff Ben Merrill, breaking into the open after his hasty descent.

"Jest teachin' this hombre a lesson," Kellogg declared. He jerked his head sideward in a gesture telling the sheriff to look to his left where three cows lay stricken in ghastly death. "Them steers has been pizened with *cicuta* grass. An' there ain't none o' that stuff on my property. It's here, on Hanscomb's range!"

Clay had stepped over to release Hanscomb, and the sheepherder, now free of his bonds, rose painfully to his feet at Kellogg's words.

"Shore I pizened them steers," he growled wrathfully. "After yuh pizened my sheep!"

"That's a lie!" Walt Kellogg bellowed.

"Hold on,. gents," Clay Merrill broke in. "Enough is enough. Nobody's been hurt bad so far. But if there's any more ruckus here, yuh'll both find yoreselves behind bars."

"To hell with you an' yore threats," roared the ranchman angrily. "Next time I lose one o' my steers, I'll take the law into my own hands an' yuh'll find that old jigger stretchin' rope from this here cottonwood!"

For an instant hot anger swept reason from the young deputy's mind. He fumed under the impulse to order the immediate arrest of Walt Kellogg, even if only to teach the rancher a lesson. But a swift glance at his grandfather restrained him. The old sheriff was clearly laboring under the weight of doubt and indecision.

WALT KELLOGG was one of the county's influential cattle ranchers. Unless the charge against him was strong enough to hold up before a jury, his arrest would incur the wrath of all the ranchers in the county against the sheriff—a condition which Clay knew would be grievous and intolerable to his grandparent. No sympathy was wasted on a sheepman in cattle country.

Gradually Clay's indignation subsided and cool reasoning returned in its place. The sheriff's silence and the dismal expression on his grizzled face were more eloquent to Clay than words. This was, Clay read there, just one more flare-up in the continual brawling between traditional enemies. As long as there was no serious damage, better let well enough alone.

"Get yore men back o' the deadline and stay there!" Clay said sternly to Kellogg.

"An' leave preservin' law'n order to me!" added the sheriff. Turning to Willie Hanscomb, who had scrambled down the hill with his horse and was standing idly by, he added: "Now get yore uncle on that bronc an' vamoose. From now on keep them woolies back o' the deadline or suffer the consequences!"

Clay and the sheriff stood rooted to the borderline as each belligerent went his way, both cursing muttered oaths. Not until they were out of sight did the lawmen mount and start back to town. Skirting the base of the hill they rode along the soft, flat ground for half a mile in the direction of Hanscomb's shack before doubling back at a point where the hill tapered down almost to level ground.

On their return to the house the sheriff removed his hat, wiped his brow relievedly.

"Glad that's over," he muttered. "I wish Jim Wallace would settle their squabbles hisself. I don't want no

run-in with the cattle ranchers on account o' sheep."

"No," Clay said understandingly. He was glad now, for the oldster's sake, that he had not forced the issue with Walt Kellogg. By arresting the rancher particularly as a result of a sheep battle, he would have had the local cattlemen up in arms. And the sheriff's job would have been jeapardized because of it.

For himself Clay had no qualms about defying the animosity of the local voters. But he knew that the old sheriff's most cherished desire was to live out his remaining years in the office he had held continuously for more than half a lifetime. Above all else he had promised himself to discharge his duties to that end.

"But I don't trust Walt Kellogg, 'specially now that Jim Wallace is away," Clay added thoughtfully. "We'll have to keep closer watch on that deadline."

"If we'da been there an hour earlier today like I warned yuh, we'd—" the sheriff complained.

"Today—yes. But how about tomorrow, and the next day, and the next? No, we gotta be there all the time till Wallace gets back—'specially at dawn and early evenin'."

"All the time?"

"Shore. In shifts. I'll start tonight. Yuh can relieve me before noon tomorrow. Then I'll go back to relieve yuh at sundown. . . ."

SHORTLY before midnight Clay picked his way carefully up the side of Saddle Hill. Then he descended halfway down the other side. He figured to command a view of the borderline of the two properties without being seen, as soon as it became light.

Now he peered through the trees for an opening against the dim, star-studded sky, adjusting his position until he made out the faint outline of the tall cottonwood tree around which the fighting had occurred earlier in the day. He spread out his bedroll, and five minutes later he was sleeping soundly.

The night passed without any untoward event but, as the first streaks of pre-dawn showed gray in the pale morning sky, Clay stirred to a faint, jerky sound. It sounded like the creaking of leather. Without opening his eyes he listened, pulled his sleepy senses alert. Again he heard the unusual sound. It came at intervals of two seconds—steady, barely audible squeaks.

Fully awake now, he sat up and peered out through the trees into the open plain. Suddenly he was pulled to his feet by a sight that made him gasp.

At the foot of the hill the dim outline of a body dangled from a rope, twirling crazily from a limb of the cottonwood tree! With each creak of the rope against the limb of the tree, the body was rising steadily higher. A man was being hanged before his very eyes!

Unable to see the person pulling the rope from behind the intervening trees, and shocked into the need for instant action, Clay let out an impulsive whoop.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Drop that rope!"

In the same instant his gun cleared leather. He leveled it hastily at the rope and fired. Immediately he plunged down the perilous decline—tripping, lurching, careening dangerously and finally sprawling headlong on the moist ground not ten feet from the base of the tree.

On the ground lay the misshapen tangled mass of the body. The hangman had let it drop to the ground when Clay fired at him. Already Clay could see a rider plunging into the dim distance, hugging the base of the hill. Identification of the rider in the faint light, besides being partially hidden by trees and tall bushes, was impossible.

Grimly Clay realized that a chase

would be futile. Besides, his pinto was up near the top of the hill.

He hurried over to the limp form, hoping desperately to find some life left in the unfortunate victim. With a start, he recognized the gaunt features of Miser Hanscomb. They were twisted in a ghastly expression of horrible death.

"Dead as a cold snake!" he muttered. "So Kellogg did him in, after all!"

A tremor of self-accusation coursed through the young deputy as his thoughts flashed back to his earlier impulse to haul the combatants off to jail. A day or two behind bars might have cooled off the hot-headed rancher.

He knelt closer to the body, examined the dead man more closely. With mild surprise he discovered that the body was cold and already stiffening. Surely, he thought questioningly, rigor mortis could not have begun to set in so quickly. Had he not seen the body in the process of being hanged only two or three minutes ago?

His curiosity thoroughly aroused, Clay decided to examine the body minutely with the aid of his laboratory equipment, before turning it over to Coroner Doc Bradley for official pronouncement of death. Swiftly he retrieved his pinto, slung the inert body of the sheepman over the front of the saddle and proceeded to his home-made laboratory. . . .

SHERIFF MERRILL, awakened by the *clop-clop* of hoof-beats at so early an hour, dressed hastily and rushed to the front door as Clay carried his burden into the house. The sheriff gasped in surprise.

"Who's the— Why, it's Miser Hanscomb!" he exclaimed, suddenly recognizing the corpse. "How'd it happen? Did Walt Kellogg do it?"

"Reckon so," said Clay, adding a hasty explanation of what had happened, as he carried the body upstairs into his workshop. "Better get out a warrant and bring Kellogg in for questionin'—"

"Warrant hell!" exploded the sheriff. "My Forty-five six-shooter is good enough warrant for me! Yuh know who done it an' I ain't askin' no questions. Are yuh comin'?"

"Just a minute. I'm a little curious about findin' the body cold. I want to examine—"

The sheriff's angry reply to his grandson was lost in the heavy thumping of his own steps as he scurried down the wooden stairs. A grim smile broke briefly over Clay's face as he thought of his grandfather brandishing his six-gun under Walt Kellogg's nose. There was little doubt in the young deputy's mind that Sheriff Ben Merrill would bring in his man.

Clay directed his attention once more to the dead body which he had placed on his workbench. Then his cool, scientifically trained mind went into action. The strong feeling persisted in him that there was more to this murder than appeared on the surface. If, as he suspected, Hanscomb was dead before he had been strung up, why should the killer have gone to the trouble of hanging his victim? Furthermore, if hanging was not the cause of death, how long had Hanscomb been dead?

He set to work methodically. In a few minutes he established the time of death at about four o'clock—a couple of hours before the hanging. Faced with this knowledge he found it difficult to reconcile the facts with his suspicion of Walt Kellogg.

For if the rancher had committed the crime, Clay doubted that he would have waited hours to string up the sheepman—unless Kellogg had thought of the heinous plan as an afterthought to make good his threat.

But somehow it didn't add up. Absorbed in thoughts of indecision Clay began the arduous task of determining the cause of death. The only outward sign was a livid purplish discoloration of the face, its features

writhed in the agonized expression of a person seized by convulsions. This struck the young deputy as peculiar. Such a death, he mused, was not consistent with range murder, unless—

His pulse quickening with anticipation, he deftly made an incision and probed into the dead sheepman's digestive tract. Then he removed a small specimen and prepared a slide, placing it under the microscope.

As he slowly turned the eyepiece into sharp focus, the cause of death became apparent to his practiced eye. There was no doubt that the sheepherder had suffered horrible convulsions—such as are induced by swallowing poison!

For an instant Clay was elated with the discovery, but his satisfaction was soon lost in a turmoil of thought as he groped to reconstruct the crime. How could Walt Kellogg have given poison to Hanscomb?

He was still concentrating on his problem when the sheriff pounded up the stairs and burst excitedly into the room.

"Well, that jasper won't cause no more trouble," announced the sheriff elatedly. "I clamped 'im in jail."

"Did he admit to the killin'?" Clay asked.

"No. He threatened to get the whole county down on me—"

"I doubt if Kellogg did it," Clay interrupted.

"What?" The old sheriff stood dumbfounded, his face flushed with sudden worry.

"It looks like Hanscomb was poisoned," Clay declared. "He admitted handlin' *cicuta* grass and it's possible he got some into his food by mistake. Or else—"

A SUDDEN inspiration came over the young deputy as an entirely new possibility entered his head.

"Or else—what?" the sheriff demanded.

"Willie!"

"Meanin' what?"

"Where could Willie've been?"

"Out tendin' sheep on the range prob'ly," the sheriff said. "He sleeps out on the pasture most o' the time. What are yuh drivin' at?"

"If Hanscomb didn't take the stuff accidental, Willie is the only one who could have slipped it into his food. Maybe that sounds crazy, but we mustn't overlook any possibility."

"Yuh're loco, son! Why would Willie want to pizen his uncle?"

"Money," said Clay. "Ain't the old miser got a bankroll cached away? Would yuh put it past that nephew of his to kill the old man so as to have the money to run away with? But first he wanted it to look as if Kellogg was the murderer."

As Clay spoke, his conviction became stronger. The old sheriff was nonplussed. The mere possibility of Willie Hanscomb's guilt struck him with a stunning force. If Willie *had* poisoned his uncle, then Walt Kellogg was innocent. And he had jailed an innocent man. Walt Kellogg of all people!

"I'm not sayin'," Clay continued, "that my figurin' is right. But I can test it by comparin' the innards—"

"Testin' be damned!" roared the sheriff. "If there's a chance yuh're right, Willie might be gettin' ready to vamoose right now. I ain't waitin'."

"Yuh're right," Clay agreed. "Go on ahead. I'll follow along over the pasture. You go straight to the shack."

As soon as the sheriff left, Clay set to work to verify his findings. He prepared a fresh sample from the sheep on which he had been experimenting and scrutinized the slide carefully. Removing the slide he squinted again at the specimen from the dead man's stomach.

The evidence was identical. The deadly camas grass, which had killed the sheep, had unquestionably been swallowed by the sheepherder.

Curiously he permitted his mind to dwell on this new evidence. He had never considered the possible effect of the poisonous grass on a human being. Yet he frankly doubted that it could be the sole cause of Hanscomb's death.

Turning his attention again to the dead body, he examined the head and was not surprised to find evidence of a blow at the base of the skull, obviously struck by a blunt instrument.

For several long minutes of deep concentration, he mentally reconstructed his theories on the killing. Then, with a deep sense of satisfaction, he snapped out of his reverie and hastened out of the house to ride in the direction of Hanscomb's pastures. . . .

THE immense plain was alive with bands of sheep lolling dreamily in the yellow blaze of the early morning sun. But the picture of lazy contentment was a sharp contrast to the fury which smoldered within the young deputy.

He scanned the rolling terrain as he reined the pinto in and around the closely huddled bands of woolies, then followed the shady trail along the base of Saddle Hill. He stepped up the pace of his horse, and after ten minutes he pulled up at Hanscomb's shack in a skidding stop.

A quick survey offered no sign of any human being, and a peaceful stillness hung over the atmosphere. While dismounting it occurred to him that the sheriff should have arrived here a short while before. Then why didn't he come outside to meet him?

Fearfully Clay stepped over to the entrance in two quick strides, pushed open the door and lurched inside. No sooner had he put his foot into the room than he heard the restless stomp of a horse at the rear of the shack. Sudden suspicion froze him in his tracks and he made an instinctive move to step back.

But it was too late, for he was suddenly staring into the muzzle of a black .45. And in back of the gun stood the ominous-looking frame of Willie Hanscomb. A hateful leer covered the face of the sheep tender, his ashen-gray eyes fixed on Clay in a maniacal glare.

Behind Willie, the old sheriff lay sprawled, a senseless heap. A fleeting glance assured Clay that the extent of his grandfather's injury must have been the result of a severe blow on the head.

Whatever doubts Clay had previously had about the sanity of Willie Hanscomb were now dispelled by the sheep tender's frenzied expression. For it was apparent that Willie was losing his slim grasp on the fringe of sanity.

The young deputy's mind raced furiously as he thought of the best way to cope with his demented captor. For several agonizing seconds he stood motionless, weighing his chances of a quick draw against the poised weapon. Already Willie's finger was visibly twitching on the trigger of the cocked gun.

But something in the back of Clay's mind cautioned him to maintain a natural, unafraid manner. He relaxed with outwardly exaggerated coolness and lifted his hands deliberately away from his gun-belt.

"What's wrong, Willie?" he said, a friendly tone in his voice.

"Step inside," said Willie, his face distorted in an ugly grin. "Been waitin' for yuh."

Clay advanced slowly, keeping a level gaze at Willie's colorless eyes.

"Now take it easy, Willie," he said. "Nobody wants to harm you."

Willie made no reply but circled his prisoner, placing himself between Clay and the door. From behind, he snatched the gun from Clay's holster and flung it aside as he stepped back quickly.

"Now get over there," he ordered in a half-hysterical voice.

"Shore," said Clay, turning and

backing away with pausing steps, as if to show his ostensible intention of obeying. Near a bunk at the side of the room Clay halted again and repeated his exhortations in a soothing voice.

"Just tell me what's on yore mind, Willie," he continued persuasively, realizing that his best chance was to engage the deranged man in a conversation, if possible. At the same time he maintained his level gaze directly into Willie's eyes, playing for time, sensing that Willie could not withstand his direct gaze without looking away.

The next few seconds passed like an eternity. Clay stood poised, ready to strike as soon as Willie should drop his eyes or look aside for the briefest instant. Then Willie's eyes flickered. And the insane man, as if struggling against his own weakness, squeezed the trigger!

CLAY hurtled his body to one side and backward toward the bunk as yellow flame streaked toward his body, creasing his left side under the armpit.

The momentum of his lunge threw him flat on his back as he landed on the bunk. Recovering quickly from the shock, he opened his eyes and saw Willie shuffling slowly toward him, a wild-eyed, fanatical look on his face.

Clay narrowed his eyes to hair-line slits, watched breathlessly as Willie approached the bunk. Then, under the pretense of writhing pain, he doubled up his knees and lashed out with both feet. One foot caught Willie in the stomach, the other knocked the gun from Willie's hand.

With a startled grunt the big man fell back a few steps, as much from surprise as from the force of the blow. With a demoniacal shriek he lunged toward Clay, but the young deputy was up on his feet now and met the oncoming rush with a terrific bombardment of lefts and rights to both sides of Willie's face.

The blows seemed to have no more effect on the madman than birdshot on an elephant. He waded in like a huge gorilla reaching out to destroy its prey with bone-crushing arms. An icy fear rippled through Clay. A fight at close range would be inviting disaster.

He danced away, stabbing his antagonist's face and eyes with long jabs, circling to the right and to the left, slashing out with sharp, cutting hooks.

At the end of three action-filled minutes the big man's face was a bloody pulp, his eyes half-closed.

But he kept right on coming in savagely, blindly. Now they were in the center of the room and Clay cast quick, searching glances around the floor for one of the guns. His arms were heavy and numb from the furious pummeling.

Suddenly his foe sprang forward in a desperate lunge and seized Clay by one arm. For an instant Clay felt his body go limp as the big man drew him savagely to his body and wrapped a steely arm around his neck.

With all the power in his being, Clay struggled to wrench clear of the iron grip. And with the strength born of sheer desperation, he wriggled free and fell back against the side wall, gasping for breath.

From the center of the room, his antagonist was coming at him again, both eyes almost completely closed by mounds of swollen flesh. He lunged for Clay again in a frenzy of rage. The young deputy, drawing upon the last ounce of his remaining strength, fixed his gaze on his foe's chin and let go with what he knew would be his last punch.

It was a good one. The big man's knees buckled and he fell face forward like a stricken ox. Clay leaned back against the wall with an overwhelming sensation of relief. . . .

The sun had reached its zenith by the time Clay and the sheriff returned home with their handcuffed prisoner.

All the fight had gone from Willie Hanscomb and he permitted himself to be led around like a dumb animal.

The sheriff, recovered from his embarrassment as well as from the blow on his head, was more inclined to talk now, after both men had washed and attended to each other's wounds.

"How come yuh figgered it was Willie pizened his uncle?" he asked.

"Well," drawled Clay, "I don't suppose Willie will ever be in a condition to confirm this, but I reckon it this way. Willie was sane enough to know that he wanted his uncle out of the way so he could get his bankroll. I suspect he welcomed trouble between Miser Hanscomb and Walt Kellogg, hopin' Kellogg would eventually kill his uncle. So he poisoned his own sheep with camas grass, knowin' it would stir up trouble."

"It shore did!" exclaimed the sheriff. He was thoughtful for a moment. Then: "But why did Willie come to town and tell us about the fight?"

"He wanted us to see what was goin' on between his uncle and Kellogg. He was goin' to kill Miser and wanted us to think that Kellogg killed him as a result of their fight. He thought up the crazy scheme o' choppin' up some poison grass—a dumb idea—and puttin' it in the old man's food. Only it didn't work. I figure it'd take a heap o' that stuff to kill a man."

"Then it was the hangin' that killed him?"

"No. Old Hanscomb got powerful sick but he didn't die. He got an attack of convulsions, and Willie got scared and finished the job by knockin' him over the head. Then he got the idea of makin' it look like Walt Kellogg's necktie party, rememberin' the cottonwood tree and what Kellogg had threatened in the heat of anger to do to his uncle."

"Sufferin' coyotes!" the sheriff yelped, jumping up and grabbing his hat. "I clean forgot. Walt is still in jail!"

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Texas Ranger

By BRADFORD SCOTT

Author of "Texas Ranger Courage," "Texas Ranger Triumph," etc.

Walt Slade Bucks Up Against a Combination of Gypsum Deposits and Goats That Spells a Heap of Roaring Six-Gun Trouble!

CHAPTER I

Pecos Law

A STRANGE river is the Pecos. From the pine-clad mountains of New Mexico to the gray, bleak bluffs of the Rio Grande on the Texas border, it winds its tortuous way through canyon and gorge, across rangeland and desert, under the calm stars of the hills, under the blazing sun of Texas for nearly a thousand miles. Over grim black rock its wild white waters thunder, or lap banks of emerald, or whisper over sands of yellow gold.

Here a mighty wall, red as slow-dripping blood, shunts the swirling eddies toward an opposite bank of palest blue, splotched and marbled with white and gray and murky jade. There a craggy battlement of burnt orange looms starkly, its far-reaching shadow falling upon a beach of warm amber with, beyond, the deathly gray of alkali flats or the ash-washed silver of the dreary reaches of the salt.

Its waters are molten moonlight.

Justice

A Complete Novelet Featuring The Hawk

His guns gushed flame over the bearded man's shoulder

Its waters are purple wine. It is the spilled paint pots of the gods, winding between the fragments of a shattered rainbow. And over all the azure arch of infinity and the showering gold of the sun.

It is a haunted river, the Pecos. That ominous red upon its bank *may* be but an outcropping of cinnabar. But like as not it is the time-defying stain of the blood of a murdered man, crying voicelessly for vengeance. That eerie wail under the cold moon *may* be the hunting call of a hungry cougar. But then again it may be the agonized cry of a soul, terrified and

aghast, ripped from its quivering clay and hurtled into the silver-shadowed dark.

Perhaps it is but the moan and mutter of the water chafing against the stones—perhaps! Or the sob of a dying man gurgling from his blood-filled throat. The Pecos! Where the West really begins. Where men bulk big, and the things they do are forgotten, because there is always so much more to do. Forgotten, the deeds and the men, but always the Pecos is there, winding and shining in the sunlight, glittering under the stars.

On a wall of rock which lipped the shining river, Walt Slade, he whom the Mexicans of the river villages named *El Halcon,* sat his magnificent black horse and gazed across the turbulent water to where a steep, rock-strewn slope was stained wine and scarlet by the last rays of the setting sun.

VIEWED in profile, it was easy to see why the peons, who loved *El Halcon* for his justice and his kindness toward the humble people of the Rio Grande, had named the tall man with the black hair and the black-lashed gray eyes "the Hawk." Like, indeed, was his lean, bronzed face to the fierce and fearless hawk of the mountains, whom even the great condor vultures and the lordly eagle respect.

Over his shoulder, in a waterproof case suspended by a cord, was a small guitar. As he gazed across the hurrying water with sunny eyes, Slade slipped the guitar from its case and his slim, bronzed fingers breathed across the strings. Then he sang, sang in a voice as golden as the sunlight pouring out of the west.

The spirit of the crystal-clear river seemed to dwell in that song, its rush and thunder over the rocks, its whisper in the night, its color and mystery, the warmth of its sunlight and the music of its winds.

The horse arched his satiny neck and seemed to listen. The winds stirred the singer's thick black hair at his bronzed temples. The guitar dripped silvery beads of sound. The music died, and the tall singer lounged easily in his saddle, his gray eyes laughing at the world and finding it good, his rather wide mouth grin-quirked at the corners, its generous cheerfulness softening the grimness of the hawk nose and the jutting chin.

"Feller, that was mighty purty."

Slade did not turn at the words spoken behind him.

"Thanks, old-timer," he said. "Reckon yuh can shove that rifle back into the boot. Yuh won't be needin' it here."

"How in time did yuh know I pulled it out?" demanded the voice in astonished tones. "Yuh shore didn't turn 'round all the time I was ridin' across the bluff."

Slade laughed musically, turned and held up the guitar. The silver tail-piece provided a perfect mirror.

"Shadow, my hoss here, heard yuh first," he told the grizzled, stocky man who sat his horse a dozen yards distant. "He let me know with his ears and I jest shifted the box a little so's I could get a look at yuh as yuh rode up. Decided it was all right, even after yuh slipped the long gun outa the saddle boot. Otherwise I woulda turned 'round."

Some of the laughter left his sunny eyes as he spoke and their warm gray underwent a subtle change.

The oldster nodded his understanding.

"Yeah, I reckon yuh would," he admitted, and added, a trifle apologetically, "I didn't mean to seem on the prod, but so many funny things has happened in this here country of late, a feller don't know jest where he stands."

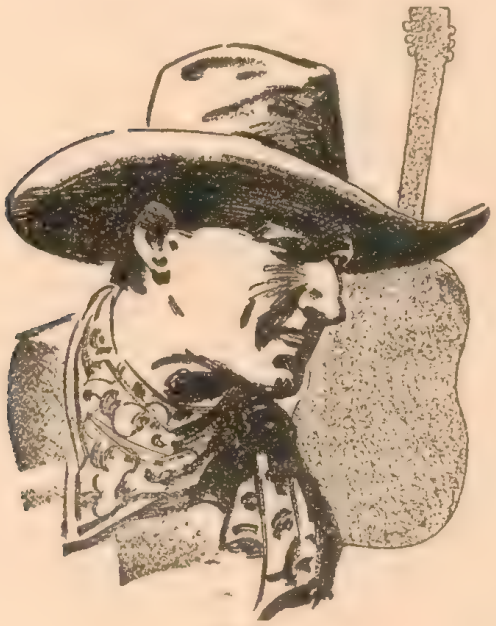
"Meanin'?"

The old-timer, who had cattleman written all over him, up-ended his rifle and started to shove it back into the saddle boot before replying. His

stocky form was silhouetted blackly against the red blaze of the setting sun.

C-r-r-rack!

Slade was off his horse before the whiplash sound of the distant rifle reached his ears. Only the passing, perilously close, of a high-power rifle bullet makes that peculiar splitting, crackling sound, and once heard it is



The Hawk

not forgotten. Slade had heard that sound before.

EVEN as his feet hit the ground, he was conscious of a thudding sound and a queer, choked grunt. His glance swept to the old-timer just in time to see him topple from his saddle, crash to the ground and lie still. Then another bullet yelled past.

"Trail, Shadow!" Slade shouted, whipping his Winchester from the boot and throwing himself flat on the ground behind a swell of rock.

Instantly the black horse streaked it for the trees at the far edge of the bluff, weaving, zigzagging, a fleeting and elusive target.

Slade, the barrel of his rifle jutting forward, kept his eyes glued to the boulder-littered slope scrambling upward from the far bank of the river. He doubted that the unseen rifleman over there could tell that the scudding black horse was minus a rider.

He grunted with satisfaction as a pale flicker showed against the dark background of the slope. A ray of sunlight had reflected from the drygulcher's rifle barrel as he shifted his aim. An instant later the bullet wailed overhead and as Shadow, unharmed, vanished amid the trees, there came the snapping, distant report.

The thready crack was echoed by the crash of the Hawk's Winchester. A puff of dust showed where the bullet had struck, close, very close to that flicker of light.

Prone behind the rock, Slade raked the slope with slugs. The drygulcher fired back, and balls of dust puffed up around Slade's shelter. A bullet hit the rock, screamed off into space and showered the Hawk with chips of stone and splinters of lead.

He took careful aim and fired again and again. He saw the dust puffs that showed where his bullets struck, and revised his aim accordingly. Then abruptly he lowered the rifle and stared in amazement.

"What in blazes?" he wondered.

Puffs of dust were flinging up all along the ragged slope, as if a company of cavalry were firing in volley. For an uncertain moment the Hawk was at a loss as to what it could mean.

Then the explanation came, and he swore softly between his teeth.

Those puffs of dust were caused by boulders bounding down the slope. His bullets, or the shock of the firing, had loosened them in their bed of ages and sent them rolling among their fellows. And each bounding stone aroused dozens of others. Almost instantly the entire slope was a roaring avalanche, rushing toward the silvery river.

Slade saw the drygulcher, a darker blotch against the slope, spring from his concealment and try to flee. He

was instantly joined by half a dozen other frantic figures. For a tense moment they went leaping and zigzagging toward the far edge of the slope. Then a hurtling boulder struck one, bowling him over and over like a plugged rabbit. He tried to stagger to his feet, scrambled, flopped, struggled to his knees, then vanished with his fellows in a roaring cloud of dust and flying stone.

ALMOST as quickly as it had begun, the avalanche ended. The dust cloud settled, the boulders ceased to leap and whir. Widening ripples dimpled the surface of the river to show where the flying stones had struck and disappeared. Perhaps some of those lessening eddies were caused by the broken bodies of the drygulchers, now hurrying downstream in the grip of the current. Slade could not tell.

He took a step toward the fallen cattleman, who still lay with his face buried in the grass. Then he halted

abruptly, staring with narrowed eyes at the trees which fringed the edge of the bluff, from which a tight group of horsemen were riding, ready rifles gripped in their hands.

The horsemen rode swiftly across the bluff, pulling up abruptly a score of yards from where Slade stood lounging easily, his thumbs hooked over the top of his cartridge belt. They stared at him, their glances flickered to the old-timer's horse standing patiently beside his body. They had not noted the body as yet.

"That's Uncle Billy's hoss!" exclaimed one, an accusing note in his voice as his gaze flickered to Slade.

"Where's Uncle Billy?" demanded another.

The horse moved a trifle just then and they saw the body. There was a concerted gripping of weapons. Then they froze in grotesque attitudes, glaring at the tall, hawk-faced man who stood with the rifle, and the forgotten guitar at his feet.

Slade's bronzed hands had moved in a blurred gesture too swift for the eye to follow. The riders, their rifles held in awkward positions, faced two unwavering black muzzles. Behind the sights of the long Colts, the Hawk's eyes were devoid of laughter, cold as the Pecos water where the shadows are deep.

One of the riders, a loose-jointed, amiable-appearing individual who, nevertheless, had a truculent eye, spoke harshly, his voice angry.

"Feller, yuh can't get 'way with it! We'll down yuh in the end."

"Mebbe," was the calm rejoinder. "But the road to the hereafter is gonna be almighty crowded in front of me when I start on the trip."

Muttered oaths greeted the remark.

"He's one of 'em, shore as guns—a new one!" exclaimed a voice. "Dressed like a hand, but he ain't got no hoss."

Slade's lips pursed in a clear whistle. A shrill neigh answered from amid the trees, there was a swift patter of hoofs and Shadow appeared, circling the mounted men, bringing up a little distance from his master, ears pricked, nostrils flaring, watchful and alert.

"He's got a hoss, all right," muttered a voice. "*Some* hoss!"

"Jest the same he done for Uncle Billy," growled another. "Feller, pen them hoglegs. We ain't drygulchers. Yuh'll get a fair trial."

Perhaps he meant it, but Slade was not at all sure. The black looks cast in his direction held pretty good promise that once the threat of his steady guns was removed, he was in a fair way to become a cottonwood apple.

CHAPTER II

Resurrection

AS IT stood, the situation was impossible. Somebody was going to take a chance in a minute. Already more than one rifle was shifting stealthily, tensing for a snap shot. That would set every gun on the bluff top to roaring. Slade realized he was going to be forced to make a move he had no desire to make. The situation was desperate.

His tense muscles relaxed the merest trifle, but his eyes remained rock-steady on the group that faced him. Then a booming voice broke the silence.

"What's all this goin' on here?"

The "dead man" was sitting up, and for a corpse he showed considerable animation. He rubbed a purpling lump on his forehead, glared at Slade, and at the grouped punchers.

"What yuh mean throwin' down on my boys?" he demanded of the gray-eyed stranger.

Grinning hugely, Slade slid his big guns into their sheaths.

"So's they wouldn't throw down on me," he replied.

The old-timer rubbed his bruised forehead, and swore at everybody present.

"What yuh mean?" demanded the loose-jointed man with the pleasant face. "Didn't he shoot yuh?"

"'Course he didn't shoot me, Curt, yuh blame loco jughead!" roared Uncle Billy.

"Well, who did?" wailed the bewildered Curt.

"That blasted skunk across the river—" began Uncle Billy, but a young puncher broke in, his voice surprised.

"Ain't nobody shot him!" he declared. "No gun bullet ever made that bump on his head. He musta fell off his hoss. We hadn't oughta let a old feller ride alone."

Uncle Billy glowered, and swore a string pleasantly.

Shaking with laughter, Walt Slade pointed to the oldster's rifle, which lay in the grass, its stock splintered.

"The slug that feller shot from across the river hit the stock of his long gun as he was shovin' it back in the boot," Slade voiced the obvious explanation. "It slammed the stock against his head and knocked him out."

A cowboy swung to the ground and picked up the fallen weapon.

"Yuh're right, feller," he said. "Look, here's the slug stuck in the wood."

He tugged at the bit of lead but his fingers slipped from the smooth surface and it remained imbedded in the stock.

"Reckon it'll take a pair of pincers to pull it out," he said. "Or mebbe I can cut it loose."

Slade sauntered to where he stood. "Let me see it a minute," he requested.

The cowboy passed over the rifle and Slade gripped the bullet with the tips of a sinewy thumb and forefinger. Those watching saw great muscles swell out on his forearm until the seams of his coat started. Then the bullet came out of the wood.

"Whe-ew!" muttered a cowboy. "How'd yuh like to have that feller get his fingers on yore windpipe!"

SLADE turned the battered bullet in his palm, the concentration furrow between his black brows deepening. Then he casually dropped it in his pocket.

"Like to keep it for a souvenir," he remarked in careless tones.

"Yuh're welcome to it," grunted Uncle Billy, getting stiffly to his feet. "What yuh reckon become of that polecat that flung it?"

Slade, his eyes grave again, gestured toward the wide sweep of raw earth which marred the slope across the river.

"Him and me was throwin' lead at

each other, and I reckon the vibrations of the slugs started a rock slide," he explained. "Anyway, five or six fellers jumped up from behind things and when the dust had settled, they j e s t naturally wasn't nowheres around."

The punchers stared soberly at the hurrying water.

"Old Pecos don't never give up its dead," remarked one. The others nodded solemn agreement.

Slade picked up his guitar and slipped it into its case. He shoved his rifle into the boot and forked Shadow.

"Well, reckon that settles that," he remarked.

There was an awkward silence, broken at length by the lanky, pleasant-faced man, who seemed to be the spokesman for the group.

"Sorry about what happened, feller, but yuh'll have to admit things looked sorta funny. Uncle Billy Tilden is our boss, yuh see—he owns the Circle T—and we didn't take over kind to seein' him laid out thataway."

"Why, yuh'd every one have been glad to get a day off to go to the buryin'!" snorted Uncle Billy, but there was a pleased expression in his frosty old eyes.

He secured his battered J.B. from where it lay in the grass, cuffed it over one grizzled brow, swearing pungently as the band raked his bruise, and forked his rangy sorrel. The sorrel tried to bite off a leg and Uncle Billy called him everything but a horse. Both apparently felt better after the mutual exhibition of temper. Uncle Billy turned to Slade.

"Feller," he said, a note of apology in his voice, "s'pose yuh ride to the spread with us and put on the nosebag. It ain't over far, coupla miles 'round the next bend and twice that up Sinkin' Crik Valley." He paused. "That is, if yuh ain't headed some place else."

"Jest sorta passin' through—jest ridin'," Slade told him. "Figgered there'd oughta be some work further up the river, what with the fall roundups about ready to get under way."

Uncle Billy eyed him contemplatively as the group got under way, following a well defined trail which wound across the bluff and close to the river edge of it.

"Range hand, eh?" he remarked, his eyes running over Slade's cowboy outfit.

"Uh-huh, when I'm one," Slade replied cryptically.

THE peculiar wording apparently passed over Uncle Billy's head. He nodded.

"Good hands ain't over easy to come by on this range," he announced. "Particular at roundup time. . . . Yuh say yuh're lookin' for work?"

"Ain't exactly runnin' away from it," Slade sparred.

"I can use a tophand or two," Uncle Billy stated.

"I can sorta pretend at bein' a tophand if necessary," Slade replied.

"All right," said Uncle Billy, understanding perfectly. "Regular riders' top wages, and found, per usual. I'll sign yuh up when we get to the ranchhouse. Boys"—he nodded, raising his voice—"this feller's signin' on."

"Slade's the name," replied *El Halcon.* "Preacher said Walter when he throwed water in my face. Gents with tired jaws sorta whittled that down to 'Walt'."

The punchers nodded gravely, and were introduced.

"This disjointed bean pole, Curt Blazer, is my nephew," explained Tilden. "My dead sister's brat. Others are sorta by adoption, I reckon."

The amiable-faced young man grinned. The others chuckled, and winked to one another behind the oldster's back.

"Good outfit," Slade mused to himself. "Square boss, and square men workin' for him. Figger I did a purty good chore today, even if I hadn't figgered on it. Well, begins to look

as if Cap McNelty was right again, per usual."

Many persons along the Border and along Texas' wild frontiers would have wondered at this respectful, even affectionate reference to Captain Jim McNelty, the "Grand Old Man" of the Rangers, by *El Halcon,* who, if he didn't ride an owlhoot trail, at least ambled a lot too close to that dubious track for the good of his own reputation. . . .

Just as the trail dipped over the inner lip of the bluff, half a mile farther on, Slade asked an apparently irrelevant question of Uncle Billy.

"You and yore outfit ride this trail often?"

"Uh-huh," replied the ranch owner. "It's a short cut from town—San Saba. Reckon yuh passed through the *pueblo* on yore way here?"

Slade nodded, recalling the cowtown he had skirted on his way up the valley, a town which at least so far as appearances went, certainly belied its saintly name.

The Hawk's eyes were bleak and there was a ripple of muscle along the angle of his stern jaw as he gazed across the shining river to the rugged slopes that reared up from the far bank. For a distance of more than half a mile, riders of the trail were at the mercy of riflemen who might be hidden among the brush and boulders of the slope across the river.

"I don't know what it was all about," he remarked, "but after what happened today, I got a notion yore outfit had better take a little more time gettin' to town, and lay off shortcuts for a spell."

Uncle Billy followed the direction of *El Halcon's* gaze and swore between his stubby teeth.

"I got a notion yuh're right, feller," he admitted. "The lobos!"

Slade did not ask at whom the tirade was directed. In this bleak land of great distances and grim secrets, men grew uncommunicative. He knew he would learn more, and learn it sooner by a discreet silence, than by questioning.

THE trail left the bluffs, wound down a long slope and curved westward, following a bend of the river. The hollows were brimful of purple shadows and the cliff tops were ringed about with saffron flame when they turned into a shallow valley full five miles in width. Down its center flowed a sluggish stream.

It was a good range, Slade saw at once, rich with succulent needle and wheat grasses. Often it was close to being marshy as the slow stream spread widely over the flat surface. To the south the slopes were gradual and grass-covered. To the north, however, they were much more rugged, precipitous in places, and were clothed with deciduous growth and considerable evergreen.

There were mountain mahogany, bluebrush, some service berry, junipers and cedars; piñon was in evidence. The sides of dry washes were thickly grown with flowering weeds. Grass was apparent where the brush growth was sparse, but not in sufficient quantity to tempt cattle to stray from the lush valley.

As they rode up the valley, old Bill Tilden twisted in his saddle and shook a gnarled fist at the rugged slopes swelling away into the north.

"That's where the blasted skunks hang out!" he growled. "Huh, they're gonna stay there, too. They ain't gonna get Sinkin' Crik Valley!"

"Who?" Slade asked.

"Sheepmen!" spat Uncle Billy, as if the word left a bad taste in his mouth. "Been comin' in for the past six months—comin' outa the north. Gettin' all set to drive their blasted blattin' woollies into the valley when they think they can get away with it. All set to ruin our range! Let 'em try it, darn 'em! You saw a sample of their 'tarnation work today."

"Yuh think it was sheepmen done that drygulchin' then?"

"I'd like to know who in tarnation else!"

They rode on up the valley, and *El Halcon's* bronzed face was stern. It was not hard to see that if something were not done to prevent it, and quickly, the crystal air and the bright Pecos sunshine would be fouled by powder smoke, and this peaceful little valley would run red with blood. Yes, Captain McNelty had been right—as usual.

"Trouble between cattlemen and sheepmen in the Pecos Valley, close to a town called San Saba and not far from the Guadalupes," had come a terse message to *El Halcon* ten days before. "Two men killed already, more killin's liable to happen."

"Range wars is usually interestin', feller," the Hawk had confided to Shadow, the black horse, as he had ridden out of the Border town of Dobie, where a crooked schemer had just died and some others were on their way to the gallows or the penitentiary. "'Spose you and me take a little ride and do some investigatin'."

Shadow had offered no kind of objections, and Slade had ridden northward toward where Guadalupe Peak reared its vivid majesty into the blue Texas sky, and the Pecos was burnished silver between its rainbowed banks.

Now he had concrete evidence that the message was not based on misinformation. *El Halcon* visioned opportunity. . . .

The Circle T ranchhouse was a rambling old building set in a grove of oaks that must have been venerable when Coronado rode northward to follow his golden dream. Slade noted that corrals and outbuildings were tight and in good repair.

"I'll introduce yuh to my foreman, Col Bowers, and he'll sign yuh up while we're waitin' for chuck to be ready," Uncle Billy told Slade after they had washed up behind the big kitchen.

He led Slade to his office off to one side of the main living room.

CHAPTER III

Sheep?

COLUM BOWERS was an intellectual appearing man of around forty. He was tall, broad of shoulder, lean of waist, and undoubtedly knew the cattle business despite his scholarly look, which was enhanced by the heavy lenses of his steel-rimmed glasses. His speech was the speech of the rangeland, however, and the eyes back of the thick lenses were keen and alert.

He gave Slade a quick glance, nodded acknowledgment of Tilden's introduction and got out his time sheets. Uncle Billy clumped back to the kitchen to hustle the cook.

Slade signed the sheets. Bowers gazed at him in a speculative way.

"'Walter Slade'," he read off the name. "Uh-huh, 'Walter Slade'."

He eyed Slade steadily through his glasses.

"Uncle Billy seems to have took a likin' to you, Slade," he commented in a quiet voice. "He right often takes a likin' to fellers, and hires 'em. Sometimes he makes mistakes. I'm not sayin' he made one this time, but I've heard considerable about a feller they call *El Halcon* down the Border way. Had him pointed out to me once, in fact."

Slade's black-fringed eyes did not waver.

"Meanin'?" he asked softly.

"Nothin' special. Wasn't never nothin' proved against *El Halcon* that I ever heard tell of, but some mighty funny stories went around. We been havin' trouble on this range of late, feller, and I've noticed that two-gun men have a habit of ridin' to where there's trouble. Uncle Billy's a right nice boss to work for, feller."

"When I work for a man, I work

for that man," Slade replied evenly.

"All right," replied Bowers. "I was jest lettin' yuh know that *I* work for Uncle Billy too."

He took off his glasses and polished them with a handkerchief, then held them up and peered through them. They were directly on a level with the Hawk's eyes when he did so, and Slade also gazed through the clean lenses and into the eyes back of them. As he did, the furrow between his own black brows deepened the merest trifle, a sign that the Hawk was doing some fast and intense thinking.

Before going to bed, Slade sauntered out to the corral to be sure that Shadow was properly cared for.

"Looks like we dropped plumb in the middle of things, per usual, feller," he said, as the black horse muzzled his palm with a velvet nose. "Sorta indirect today, we done for five or six of the outfit that's kickin' up the fuss around here. Feller, that ain't goin' to be forgot. The story is goin' to get 'round and the rest of the outfit'll know who was responsible for that landslide that wiped out their bunkies. Nope, they're not goin' to forget, and they're not goin' to let it pass, either. They'll be out to even the score. . . ."

SLADE rode the Circle T range for some days without anything untoward or of interest happening. He revised his first opinion of the spread somewhat. The grass was good, water plentiful, but there was practically no timber, and little brush. Only at the upper end of the valley was there adequate shelter for the cattle in time of storms or during the winter snows, which he shrewdly surmised drifted heavily into the valley, down which a wind soughed persistently.

His deductions were verified days later when he rode in search of strays in the company of the pleasant-faced Curt Blazer, Bill Tilden's nephew. They had forded the shallow stream which was the northern boundary of the Circle T and were riding across the Cross in a Box spread, owned by old Wes Hardy.

"Yep, she's a purty good spread—good enough to make a livin' on, but that's about all," Blazer replied to a chance remark. "Have to do a lot of feedin' in the winter, and that costs plenty. Uncle Billy always pays top wages and feeds his hands the best. He gets along, but that's about all.

"He was raised here and likes it, but with this sheep trouble in the makin' he's seriously considerin' sellin' out and movin' farther west, if he can find a buyer to pay somethin' halfway reasonable. Uncle Billy's peaceful. Everybody'll hate to see him go, too. Blame them sheepmen, anyhow! Why in time couldn't they leave us alone here? Things wasn't bad till they showed up."

Slade nodded. Born and reared on a ranch, his sympathies leaned toward the cattlemen, but he had seen enough of sheep and cattle rows not to be sure beforehand that right was always on the side of the ranch owners.

They rode on toward the northern slopes, trailing the wandering Circle T dogies. Soon they were close to the base of the hills. Blazer suddenly swore luridly and pointed up a nearby slope.

"There's some of the fool woollies now!" he exclaimed.

Slade stared at the alert little creatures cropping leaves and twigs from a stand of bluebrush. They had long, tight-locked fleece hanging so low as almost to hide their dainty split hooves. The horns of the bucks were powerful, curving backward and down from their skulls. He turned wonderingly to Blazer.

"Feller, yuh call them things sheep?"

"Shore. There's thousands of 'em back in the hills."

"The same kind?"

"Uh-huh, so far as anybody's seen."

"Well, they're not sheep. They're goats—Angora goats!"

"What's the difference?"

"One mighty big difference, particular so far as range is concerned," Slade replied quietly.

HE TURNED in his saddle and gazed across the lush, treeless, and practically brushless valley, and turned back to face Blazer. The concentration furrow was deep between his gray eyes.

"And yuh're tellin' me the owners of them flocks are figgerin' on takin' over this valley range?"

"Uh-huh, they shore are, if they can get 'way with it. They done sent us word."

"Yuh hear any of the shepherds say they was goin' to?"

"Nope. I don't hold no truck with any shepherds. Why?"

"Nothin', 'cept it's the first time I ever heard tell of folks riskin' shootin's and killin's to get somethin' they haven't any use for."

"What yuh mean, feller?"

"This," Slade told him quietly. "Them herders haven't any use for this valley and wouldn't know what to do with it if they owned it, unless they're figgerin' on goin' in the cattle business, which ain't over likely. And if they were, they shore wouldn't start no bloody range war over a section that everybody knows is no great shakes as ranch land.

"Them herders come a long ways with their flocks, and if they was on the hunt for cattle range, they'd shore travel on a bit farther west, where there's plenty of it they wouldn't have to fight for. Nope, I don't figger they are goin' into the cattle business. They're in the goat business right now, and got one of the best goat ranges I ever saw."

"Feller, *will* yuh tell me what you're talkin' 'bout?" Blazer demanded in exasperated tones.

"It's this way," Slade explained patiently. "Goats don't graze like cattle. They browse. Browse on tender twigs and buds and leaves. In the winter they go for evergreen browse. The kids, and the ewes in kiddin' time, go for some grass—grass increases the milk supply. Grass such as is growin' between that scattered brush up there. Goats must have plenty of brush, the kind of brush them slopes and hills are covered with.

"Look at that mountain mahogany and bluebrush. And there's service and lots of piñon. Goats like piñon nuts. They're goin' to get fat and sassy on them slopes up there. Down here in this grassy, swampy valley, they wouldn't do no good a-tall. A herder that would drive his goats down here would be plain loco! Somethin' almighty funny about talk of them herders wantin' this range."

"Jest the same they want it," Blazer declared stubbornly. "They say the cattlemen are hoggin' all the good range and haven't any more right to it than the sheepmen and that they're gonna get their share. I heard Rolf Preston tell Colum Bowers in the Red Cow Saloon in town. They come nigh onto a shootin' over it right there."

"Yuh mean this is open range—that the cowmen don't own their spreads?" Slade asked.

BLAZER shrugged.

"Purty largely that way," he admitted. "Uncle Billy owns his, which is all on the south side of the crik. He bought it from a Spanish family years and years ago. They held it under a old Mexican grant, and the courts has held them grants valid. Oh, Uncle Billy's title's safe enough, I reckon. But it's different with the spreads in this side the crik—the Cross in a Box, the Bowtie, the Rockin' Chair and the Bar Arrow. They don't own, even though some of 'em have been here for better'n twenty years. Never bothered to go about gettin' title, I reckon. It's really open range, and Wes Hardy and Crane and Mawson and the Wagner brothers ain't much different from nesters, if yuh look at it that way."

Slade nodded, his gray eyes somber and perplexed.

"Who's that Rolf Preston feller yuh mentioned?" he asked.

Blazer snorted. "He's the big skookum he-wolf of the sheepmen. Big hard feller with a bad eye. Understand he's the jigger that guided the rest of 'em into this part of the country and he does the talkin' for 'em, I reckon. Salty, all right. Col Bowers has got plenty of nerve, but he's a sorta retirin' jigger, likes to read books and such when he ain't workin'. Educated feller, even though he is a good cattleman. Doubt if he ever had a gunfight in his life. Can't say as I ever saw him shoot his Colt durin' the coupla years he's been with the Circle T.

"Uncle Billy made him foreman the early part of this year when Blaine Hazard got drygulched over by the Pecos—more sheepman work—'cause Col knows more about the cow business than any of the rest of us. He stood right up to Rolf Preston durin' that arguin', and I reckon if I hadn't stepped 'tween 'em and flashed my badge, there'd been a shootin'—a killin', rather. I don't figger Col woulda had a chance."

"Yore badge?"

"Uh-huh. I'm a deputy sheriff. The county seat is nigh onto fifty miles from here and Sheriff Pierce had me made a deputy to look after things around here."

"Hmmm!" mused the Hawk, rubbing his jutting chin. "So I reckon yuh're sorta the Law up here?"

"Sorta," Blazer admitted.

Walt Slade again rode northward, across the Cross in a Box, the following day. This time he rode alone, and he did not pause when he reached the brush-covered slopes. Instead, he sent Shadow scrambling up them. Shadow was a good mountain horse and did not mind. He ambled on into the hills, following the tiny trails made by the goats, until abruptly a small cabin appeared in a little clearing.

There were goats all about, and the herder, a deep-chested, clear-eyed man, turned abruptly at the sound of hoofs.

In the doorway of the cabin stood a woman, still young and good-looking, but with a worried face. A shy-eyed boy of perhaps ten years peered around her skirts.

"Reckon that'll be far enough, stranger," said the herder.

He held a long-barreled Winchester rifle of an old model, his thumb on the hammer. Against *El Halcon's* blazing, snake-strike draw, he would have had about as much chance as a sneeze in a hurricane.

But the Hawk's slim, deadly hands did not drop to the black butts of his guns. They remained holding the bridle, and resting peacefully on Shadow's sleek neck. Instead, he smiled, the smile that women—and men—found irresistible. His laughing gray eyes rested sunnily on the face of the child and the little fellow grinned.

"Jest wanted to know if I could get a drink for myself and my hoss," he told the herder.

"Well, I dunno—" the man began uncertainly.

"Of course he can have a drink, Pa," the woman interrupted. "And that beautiful horse can, too. Buddy, go fetch a fresh pail from the spring."

CHAPTER IV

Sidewinders

WHILE the water was being brought, Slade swung from the saddle and squatted on his heels. He had removed his wide hat and his thick, somewhat touseled hair was so black that a blue shadow seemed to lie upon it. The gray eyes that could be so icy-cold were all kindness, and the corners of his firm mouth quirked upward.

"See yuh got a lot of morocco

leather bindin's and mohair fabric amblin' around here on the hoof," he remarked to the herder. "A fine range for Angoras, ain't it?"

The herder looked surprised. "You know somethin' about the goat business?"

"A little," Slade admitted carelessly. "Enough to know a good range and well cared-for critters when I see 'em."

"That's funny," the herder said wonderingly. "You be a cattleman, ain't you?"

"When I'm workin' at it," the Hawk replied. "I'm workin' for the Circle T spread down in the valley, right now."

The herder's eyes flashed with resentment.

"I don't see why them cattle fellers can't let us alone," he said bitterly. "We ain't hurtin' 'em none. Why should they want to run us out of the hills?"

"Do they wanta run yuh out of the hills?" Slade asked gently.

"Shore they do," the herder replied vigorously. "They sent us word if we don't git out, they're comin' to run us out. They told Rolf Preston we'd better git up and git, and right away, too." He added stubbornly: "But we ain't a-goin'. We got a right here, and we're goin' to stay. We can fight if we have to. They even sent word for us to stay out of the town over on the river, where we go to buy supplies. Said they'd be waitin' for us some time."

Slade's gray eyes lost some of their sunniness.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," the herder replied, adding ominously: "They're liable to find *us* there waitin' some time, particular if there's any more shootin' from the brush like the other night when Abner Meagre got a ball through his arm. We got guns, and we can use 'em."

Slade glanced at the old-fashioned Winchester.

"Same make as my saddle gun," he remarked. "Only got a longer barrel. I been thinkin' of changin' to one of them new thirty-thirty calibers. They hit almighty hard and shoot a long ways and are a heap lighter to carry than the forty-fours."

"I've heard tell of them guns," the herder replied, "but I never seen one."

"Yore folks don't have none of 'em?"

"Nope, the boys all got Winchesters like mine, 'ceptin' for a Sharpes or two and a Brown Betty old Squire Hagadorn owns."

Slade nodded thoughtfully. Just then the water arrived and he drank deeply and gave Shadow the rest of the bucket.

"Thank yuh, son," he said in his musical voice. "Shadow, thank the feller for the water."

THE black horse gravely inclined his sleek head and bent a foreleg until he knelt on one knee. The boy clapped his hands with delight.

"Bring the pail in, Buddy," called his mother from the cabin door.

"Yuh mentioned a feller named Rolf Preston," remarked Slade to the herder. "Seems I've heard that name before somewheres."

"Rolf Preston showed us how to get to these hills," the herder explained. "He's a Western feller—weuns are from down East. New England. He bought some goats from Squire Hagadorn and stayed on. Nice feller. He don't take no nonsense from the cattlemen."

The boy shyly brought a battered banjo from the cabin and showed it to Slade.

"I can play three chords," he boasted.

Slade took the instrument and examined it gravely.

"Bridge is a mite low," he decided. "Mebbe we can fix it."

He picked up a bit of tough wood from among the chips by the chopping block and as he talked with the herder, his slim fingers were busy with his pocket knife.

"My, you're smart!" exclaimed the boy as Slade held up the finished product of his labors.

Slade chuckled and fitted the bridge in place, notching it accurately to accommodate the strings. Then he tuned the instrument, and a moment later the strings vibrated to booming chords.

"Golly, you can play!" marveled Buddy. "Play 'Susanna'."

Slade grinned, threw back his black head, and his rich voice pealed out in the rousing old marching song of the Forty-niners:

> Oh, Susanna, don't you cry for me!
> For I'm from Alabama with my banjo on my knee!

A little later he mounted his black horse and rode away, heading down the slope toward the range. The herder and his family gazed after him.

"If all cattlemen were like him, this would be a wonderful country," said the woman. "Oh, Pa, do you think they are really going to run us out? Isn't there nobody to help us? What of those rangers we heard so much about? We heard they always come to help people who are doing right and need help."

"I don't know," the man admitted. "Squire Hagadorn wrote a letter to their captain, a man named McNelty, I believe, but we haven't heard anything."

The woman gazed after the departing rider.

"That man looks like what I've pictured a ranger should look like," she declared. "Stern and handsome, with eyes that can laugh, and time, despite his work and his danger, to pause and do something to make a child happy."

The herder nodded soberly. The child's treble startled him.

"Rolf Preston says he's a bad feller, but I don't believe it."

"What you mean, sonny?" asked his father.

"I heard Rolf Preston talking to a man the day you left me in the store in town. The man said this fellow is a bad man called the Hawk. Rolf Preston swore, and then they talked real low and I couldn't hear no more. After they'd finished talking, they laughed—laughed ugly like that hyener critter we saw once in the circus."

"What makes you think they were talkin' about this feller, Buddy?" his father asked.

"Well, the man said it was a feller who rode the finest black horse he ever seen. And nobody ever seen a finer black horse than that one, did they, Pa?"

The herder stared down the slope, and fingered his long rifle.

"Ma," he said at length to his wife, "you sorta keep a eye on things. I'm goin' to amble over the rise and have a little gab with Squire. . . ."

UNCLE BILLY TILDEN, a bachelor, did not bed his boys in a bunkhouse. The rambling old ranchhouse, formerly a Spanish *casa*, was spacious, and Uncle Billy utilized the big cool rooms for his hands. Walt Slade had a small room directly across the hall from the big one occupied by Colum Bowers, the foreman. Bowers often left his door open and Slade caught glimpses of books in a big old-fashioned bookcase.

Early one morning, after he had heard Bowers clump down the stairs and out the front door, Slade slipped quietly across the hall and entered the foreman's room. He left the door ajar behind him, trusting to his keen hearing to warn him of Bowers' improbable return.

Ignoring everything else in the room, he approached the bookcase, eyeing its contents with keen interest.

First to catch his eye were several well thumbed volumes on mining and minerals. They were neither textbooks nor strictly technical works, but volumes of general information. Flanking them were numbers of the

classics, and strictly technical works dealing with various subjects.

Slade opened several of these latter, and a condition obtaining in each and every one brought a gleam of amusement to his eyes, an exultant gleam, as if some controversial point had experienced a satisfactory solution in his mind. With a final glance around, and a chuckle, he left the room. That afternoon he rode to town.

San Saba was a typical sprawling cowtown on the west bank of the Pecos. There was a general store or two, a huddle of shacks and false fronts, some 'dobes and a calaboose. Several saloons, a dancehall and a few nondescript places—the less said about the better—fronted the main street. Opposite each saloon was a hitching-rack.

One in front of the big Red Cow Saloon interested the Hawk. Four horses were tethered there, all good mounts with well worn gear. The butt of a heavy Winchester protruded from the saddle boot of one. The Hawk passed this with but a glance, but the three other boots drew more than a passing glance from him.

He narrowly studied the slim stocks of the rifles as he dismounted and tied Shadow a little distance from the clump of horses. Then he sauntered across the dusty street and entered the saloon.

Interested in the horses and their gear, he had not seen the hard eyes peering at him from a window a moment before. Nor had he seen four men slip out the side door of the saloon the instant before he entered.

The place was not busy this early in the day. There was a desultory game of poker at one of the tables. The dance floor orchestra had just arrived, and was busy tuning their instruments. A single bartender was serving half a dozen or so customers.

Slade walked to the bar and bought a drink. Sensitive to a degree to what would have been passed over by a less observant individual, he noticed the strained expression of the bartender's face.

The man's hands shook as he poured Slade's drink and he darted a furtive glance toward the door.

"Looks like he's expectin' somebody and won't be over glad when he sees 'em," the Hawk mused, sipping his drink and watching the room in the mirror of the back bar.

HE LEANED carelessly against the bar, his hat brim pulled low over his eyes, apparently paying scant attention to what went on around him, but in reality missing nothing. Even before the nervous and watchful bartender, he saw four men push their way through the swinging doors. Three of them spread out fanwise along the wall just inside the room, wandering aimlessly about, but never getting far apart as they studied the fly-specked posters and lithographs tacked on the wall.

The fourth member of the quartette lurched toward the bar with an unsteady gait. He was a big man, taller even than the tall Hawk, broad of shoulder, thick of chest and waist. He looked something like a bad-tempered bear, with his bristling black whiskers and his shaggy brows above beady black eyes that burned brightly in his dark face. His mouth was a thin red gash that cut sharply across his beard.

He reached the bar and ordered whiskey in a thick, truculent voice. The bartender hurried to pour it and his hand shook more than before. He was plainly frightened, and Slade read the real terror in his muddy eyes as he shot the Hawk one flickering, furtive glance that seemed to implore something.

The bearded man was standing close to Slade, but apparently paying him not the least attention. He raised his glass to his lips, lurched unsteadily on his feet and collided with the Hawk. The glass dropped from his hand and smashed on the bar rail. He

turned to face Slade with a bellow of anger.

"Why you locoed lobo!" he roared. lurching to one side, a ponderous fist raised as if to strike, pawing awkwardly at his holstered gun with the other.

With the speed of a lashing rattler, Slade acted. His hand shot forward and the bearded man got the contents of Slade's whiskey glass full in his eyes. With a howl, the man pawed at his eyes as the raw liquor stung and burned. Slade gripped his wrist and spun him about to face the door.

In the same blinding whirl of action Slade drew with his left hand. His gun gushed flame and smoke over the bearded man's shoulder, and one of the three men along the wall went reeling back with a yell of pain. The gun he had drawn dropped from his nerveless fingers, and he gripped a red-spurting shoulder with his other hand.

"Caught settin'," the other two froze against the wall in grotesque attitudes, gripping their half drawn guns, afraid even to let go the butts for fear the move might be misinterpreted by the icy-eyed Hawk who stood shielded by the bearded man's bulky body, and with the still smoking muzzles of his deadly Colt yawning toward them.

THE bearded man, getting a blurred picture of what had happened with his whiskey-burned eyes, let out a howl.

"Don't shoot! Yuh'll plug me, yuh'll plug me! This hellions got me where the hair's short!"

El Halcon's clear voice cut through his yammer.

"Pull yore hardware, you two, and pull it slow and easy. When the barrels clear leather, let 'em drop on the floor. Don't try any funny moves, 'less yuh figger yuh're faster'n flyin' lead. Steady, now!"

They were "steady"—steady and slow. The two Colts thudded to the floor beside that of the moaning man with the bullet-smashed shoulder.

"All right!" ordered the Hawk. "Through the door—fork yore broncs and ride. I'll be right behind yuh." He let go the wrist of the bearded man which he had doubled up behind the fellow's back, and give him a shove. "Get goin', you! Catch up with yore sidewinder pardners, and stay caught up."

His cold eyes sweeping the room in one all-embracing glance, Slade followed close behind the unsavory quartette. He marched them to the hitch-rack where, glaring murder but not daring to protest, they untied the four horses and mounted.

Slade slipped his Winchester from Shadow's saddle boot and stepped back. He said nothing, but the gesture said plenty. Stiff of necks, save for the wounded man who reeled in his saddle and moaned, they rode straight along the street until a bend hid them from view.

Slade stood watching for a moment, saw them reappear on the trail outside the town, still riding steadily upriver. Then he shoved the rifle back into place, turned, and reentered the saloon.

Dead silence greeted his entrance. Then several of the customers who had discreetly retired behind posts or under tables for the duration of hostilities, chuckled and grinned. The bartender heaved a great sigh of relief.

"Feller," he quavered, "that was fine—plumb fine. I wanted to tell yuh what was in the wind, but I was too well scared of Rolf Preston and his gun-hellions. Belly up to the bar, everybody! This'n is on the house!"

It was easy to see that the men in the saloon were decidedly curious about the affair, but in true Western style they refrained from asking questions. They contented themselves with casting appraising and admiring glances at the tall, gray-eyed stranger who stood sipping his whiskey with so

steady a hand that not a drop was spilled from the glass the bartender insisted on filling to the brim.

The let-down after the tense moments of action brought a babble of talk, however, and under cover of the din, Slade asked a casual question.

"Yuh say that feller's name is Rolf Preston?"

"Uh-huh," replied the barkeep in low tones, glancing nervously about. "He's the big skookum he-wolf of them crazy herders up in the hills. Them other fellers is his bodyguards, I reckon. Anyhow, he don't never go nowhere without 'em. Used to be four or five more of 'em, but I ain't seen 'em of late. Mebbe they gone on a trip. I hope it's a long one!"

"I sorta got a hunch it is," Slade replied dryly.

He rode back to the Circle T ranchhouse in an exultant mood. He had found the answer to one of the questions which had been bothering him, but another remained unanswered, and his dark brows drew together as he thought of it.

Why did somebody desire the Sinking Creek Valley badly enough to commit murder to get it?

CHAPTER V

Guns in the Hills

IT WAS with a wary eye to all that went on around him that Walt Slade rode the Circle T range. He knew that he was marked for vengeance by a smart and utterly unscrupulous outfit. His attempted murder by Rolf Preston, bungling and badly planned as it appeared on the surface, was really an act of daring and shrewdness.

"Made out to be drunk and jest naturally on the prod against anybody," he mused. "Drags his gun out clumsylike and I have to draw in self-defense. Then his pardners plug me to save their friend's life. Anybody asks questions—they got the answer: 'Why, that hellion was *El Halcon*, a gun-slingin' owlhoot from down the Border way! Everybody's heard tell of him'! Uh-huh, almighty smart, and Preston's got the nerve to take a chance on gettin' plugged to have me done in. But what in all creation is he after?"

That was the unanswered question that puzzled the Hawk as he rode toward the western end of the valley on an afternoon of golden autumn sunshine that filtered through air that was as heady as old wine. The valley rose sharply as it bored into the west, and here the creek was no longer a sluggish wallow. Swift and turbulent, it foamed down a narrowing gorge walled by tall cliffs of bluish limestone.

Slade could hear, some distance ahead, the muttering roar of a falls of considerable height. A little later he caught sight of it.

The creek, which entered the valley a few miles farther on, plunged over a precipice of some thirty feet in height. The valley floor rose sharply here and the chunky little bay Slade was riding had a hard scramble to make it to the less broken ground farther on. Shadow had a slightly sore hoof, and Slade was giving the big black gelding, with his phenomenal speed and endurance, a few days' rest.

Slade rode on between the encroaching cliffs that drew closer and closer together as he proceeded. He studied their formation with an eye intent as to detail, shaking his black head from time to time. It was certainly not good prospecting ground, and yet the Hawk felt sure that somewhere in this gorge of bluish stone and turbulent water was the answer to the question which puzzled him.

"Gold? Silver? Copper? Nope, not a chance. But there's somethin' here, shore as shootin'."

Before the murder of his father by wide-loopers, and the subsequent loss of the elder Slade's ranch, Walt Slade

had had three years in college, and had specialized in geology and minerals, with a career as a mining engineer in view. His father's murder had altered his ambition and had set his feet in the devious and dangerous trail he had followed since. More than once, in the course of the years, his knowledge of minerals and geological formations had stood him in good stead. Now he was seeking to apply that knowledge to the problem at hand, but so far with barren results.

He was a couple of miles beyond the waterfall now, and so intent on the terrain over which he was riding, that only the uncanny sixth sense developed in men who ride with danger as their constant bridle companion warned him in time to escape certain death.

IT WAS but a flickering gleam among the rocks ahead, but it was enough to cause the Hawk to slew his mount sideward and hurl his own body downward behind the animal's neck. As it was, he felt the wind of the passing bullet. Then the rocks ahead seemed alive with dark forms that swarmed into view, yelling and shooting.

Slade's hand streaked downward. Then, with a bitter curse, he remembered that the light rig he was using to accommodate the bay's strength was not equipped with a saddle boot. The big Winchester was not there.

Six-guns against rifles! Suicide, nothing less! Slade whirled the bay and sent him charging back down the gorge. Bullets stormed all about, flicking bits of stone into the air, kicking up puffs of dust, fanning his cheeks with their lethal breath.

"The hellion's got more men from somewhere," he muttered, apropos of Rolf Preston. "There's at least six or seven in that gang. . . . Sift sand, hoss! If we can make it to the other side of the waterfall, we'll have a chance!"

The little bay was doing the best he could, but he was not the horse for fast work over broken ground. Had Slade been forking Shadow, it would have been an exhilarating and slightly amusing game of tag, instead of the grim race with death that it was. He bitterly cursed his preoccupation resulting from studying the valley geological phenomena, which had allowed him to so nearly ride into the ambush.

But the damage was done. All he could do was make the best of it. And as the bay stumbled and floundered over the rocks, he grimly admitted that the best was none too good.

Ahead loomed the blue curve of the falls. The roar of it was in Slade's ears, dimming the crackle of the rifles behind, and the excited yelling of his pursuers. Once down the steep slope and onto the level range, the little bay would do better. And farther on were clumps of trees, in one of which he might make a stand. His pursuers would have to close in then and his six-guns would not be at such a disadvantage. Yes, he'd have a chance.

And then it happened. Slade heard a sullen thudding sound. The bay screamed shrilly, floundered, gave one convulsive leap and went down in a sprawling heap. Slade, by a miracle of agility, got his feet free from the stirrups and hurled himself from the saddle.

He struck heavily and for an instant lay stunned. Stinging fragments of stone dashed into his face by a slug that smacked a rock scant inches distant aroused him. He staggered to his feet, reeling drunkenly, glaring about.

A single glance sufficed to tell him that the bay was dead. Behind sounded a thunder of hoofs, the roar of guns and an exultant whooping.

But the drygulchers, in their excitement, were firing recklessly. None of the bullets found their mark as Slade turned and ran swiftly toward the bank of the stream. In his quick mind a desperate plan had formed. Ahead a scant score of yards was the

curving blue lip of the falls. The water rushed toward it with mill race speed and plunged over with a hollow roar.

SLADE reached the bank and without an instant's hesitation dived head-first into the creek. The current gripped him, hurled him downstream with blinding swiftness. Beneath him yawned the falls. He was over the curving lip, rushing downward.

He struck the deep pool at the foot and was plunged beneath the surface by the terrific force and weight of the falling water. He reached the rocky bottom of the pool, gripped protuberances with his hands and, slowly and painfully, began crawling over the rocks.

The mighty weight of the hurtling tons of water flattened him against the bottom of the pool, pinning him down, retarding his movements. His lungs were bursting. A redhot band of steel encircled his throbbing temples. Before his eyes swam a bloody mist. But still he struggled on, tortuous inch by tortuous inch, the last vestige of his strength swiftly ebbing away.

Whooping and yelling, the drygulchers, the bearded Rolf Preston at their head, reached the creek bank just above the falls. They stared downward, rifles ready, tense, alert.

But no sleek black head broke the surface. No struggling form appeared in the foaming welter below. For hundreds of yards the creek ran straight as an arrow. Not even a rat could have passed unnoted by the watchful eyes of the killers. Finally, with muttered curses, they relaxed.

"Never come up!" growled Preston. "Well, that's as good a way as any. The old Pecos'll take care of his body. The Pecos never gives up its dead!"

He growled a word of command and the troop, six strong including Preston and one man whose arm was in a sling, rode swiftly back the way they had come. And atop the cliffs, the man who had trailed Slade up the valley and signaled his coming to the drygulchers smiled cold satisfaction and rode on to join the killers.

Walt Slade gambled his life on his knowledge of the peculiarities of waterfalls, and won. Gasping, choking, shaking with exhaustion, he crawled out of the receiving basin of the falls and into the concave hollow between the cliff face and the rushing curtain of green water.

Sufficient air for breathing purposes filtered through the wall of falling water, and its opaque veil effectually hid him from view. He could hear nothing of what went on beyond the water, but he correctly surmised the reactions of the drygulchers when he did not appear below the falls. However, he took no chances, and a full hour elapsed before he plunged through the thin edge of the falls onto dry ground, shook the water from his eyes and glanced about.

No one was in sight, and there was no sound apparent other than the thunder of the falls and the rush of the water through the gorge. He sat on a rock in the warm rays of the late afternoon sunshine, made sure that his guns were in working order and emptied the water from his boots. Then, when his clothes had dried somewhat, he clambered back up the rise and resumed his careful examination of the gorge.

HE REACHED a spot where erosion or a lightning bolt had hurled down a portion of the cliff. Great blocks of crumbling limestone lay all about, and at the foot of the cliff the slide had ripped away much surface soil.

Slade examined the shattered fragments with interest, and as he did, his dark brows drew together and a glow birthed in the depths of his gray eyes.

Occurring in the solid mass of the limestone were well formed monoclinic crystals so twinned as to re

semble arrowheads. They were transparent, delicately fibrous, with a silky luster. At the base of the cliff, where the surface had been sloughed off, was what appeared to be a massive sedimentary bed of translucent, finely granular substance.

Slade rocked back on his heels, racking his mind for half forgotten mineralogy lore.

"Gypsum!" he exclaimed sharply. "That's what it is, shore as blazes! Gypsum, the base of alabaster, gypsum plaster, various cements, and so on. This whole gorge is one vast deposit of sedimentary beds. Uncle Billy Tilden's got a fortune right under his nose and don't know it. No wonder them hellions want to freeze him out of the valley so's they can buy it up cheap. Well, reckon here's where *I* cut in on the game!"

Rising, he started back down the valley in the fading light of dusk. . . .

Curt Blazer was aroused from a sound sleep just after midnight, by a hand on his shoulder. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and stared into the face of Walt Slade. Slade looked tired, his clothes were rumpled as if recently wet, but his eyes glowed with satisfaction.

"What's all this?" sputtered Blazer.

He measured Slade with a quick glance, and his eyes hardened with suspicion.

"Jest what's the idea?" he demanded. "I been hearin' some funny things of late, feller, about—about a jigger knowed as *El Halcon,* who rides a black hoss and is sorta fancy with a gun. Heard, too, that of late he's took to ridin' to sheepmen's camps."

Slade nodded quietly. "Uh-huh," he agreed. "I had a notion yuh'd be due to hear things. What does Uncle Billy say?"

"He's stubborner than a blue-nosed mule!" snorted Blazer. "Says he knows a right feller when he sees one, and don't need no advice from jughead cowpunchers."

Slade chuckled. "Uncle Billy makes mistakes," he remarked cryptically. "Feller, yuh say yuh got a deputy sheriff's badge? I'd like to see it."

With another snort, Blazer hauled his shirt from where it hung on a nearby chair, fumbled inside the pocket and drew forth a shiny nickel badge which he laid on the table.

"There she is," he grunted.

Walt Slade's slim fingers reached out and laid a glittering object beside the badge. Curt Blazer stared with widening eyes at a silver star set on a silver circle!

"A ranger!" he gulped at length. "*El Halcon* a Texas Ranger!"

"Yes," Slade replied quietly. "Undercover man for Captain McNelty's company. I'm here because of the cattlemen-sheepmen trouble."

"Well, I'll be blowed!" declared Blazer in awed tones.

Slade chuckled, then his eyes became grave.

[*Turn Page*]

"I've a notion yuh're a jigger that can keep his mouth shut," he said. "Now listen close and don't ask questions 'cept when yuh need to."

He spoke earnestly for a few minutes, Blazer nodding from time to time. Then the puncher began hurriedly to don his clothes.

"We'll slip down to the kitchen and rustle yuh some chuck," he said. "Everybody's asleep. Then we'll ride. . . ."

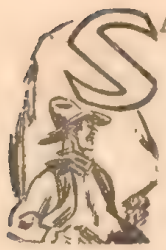
The dawn was rose and gold in the eastern sky when Slade and Blazer rode up to the cabin of Abner Hatch, the clear-eyed goat herder Slade had visited some days before. Early as it was, Hatch was already astir. He listened to Slade's explanation and sent Buddy hustling off through the brush.

An hour later a cadaverous old man with a lean face that did not move a muscle, but an eye that twinkled, approached the cabin. Hatch introduced him as Squire Hagadorn, a moving spirit of the herders. Ernest conversation followed.

Then Blazer shook hands solemnly with Hatch and Hagadorn and rode away. Slade remained at the cabin, Buddy's banjo on his knee, Shadow looking over his shoulder and Buddy, with adoring eyes, at his feet.

CHAPTER VI

The Out Trail



SAN SABA was crowded, but there was little of hilarity in the cowtown, even though it was payday for the valley spreads and the punchers had money in their pockets. The air was tense. For the long expected showdown between the cattlemen and the herders was liable to come today.

In front of the Red Cow Saloon, a tight group of cowboys stood somberly gazing northward along the trail which led to the rugged slopes beyond Sinking Creek Valley.

"Think they'll show up?" muttered one to his bunky.

"Col Bowers said for shore they was goin' to," replied the other. "He said Preston sent him word they'd ride into town about noon. Let 'em come, and let 'em start somethin'! We're ready. Look, there's Bowers over on the other side the street by the racks."

"Uh-huh, and there's dust showin' where the trail cuts around that shoulder. Uh-huh, here they come! Get set, fellers, but let them make the first move. We don't want to be in the wrong in this business."

Swiftly the approaching group rode into town. At their head was bearded Rolf Preston, his black eyes snapping. Close about him were five hard-faced, swarthy individuals who carried stubby, small-bore rifles.

Behind, rode a dozen or more herders, bearded, grave-eyed men with faces set in stern lines—the type of men whose ancestors had faced the redcoats at Concord and Lexington, and had fought and died for a principle. Their level gaze rested on the reckless young Texans whose ancestors had held the Alamo against the Mexican hordes, until the last man had died for a principle.

The herders pulled up at the far end of the long hitch-rack. Rolf Preston and his henchmen dismounted and swaggered forward while the herders were still hitching their horses. In front of the dusky doorway of Sol Mason's general store, alongside the Red Cow, Preston and his men paused, eyeing the cattlemen with studied insolence. Preston opened his bearded lips to speak.

And then without warning the dark doorway of the general store bristled with the yawning twin barrels of sawed-off shotguns. Through the opening stepped Curt Blazer, flanked on either hand by Abner Hatch, the big herder, and grim old Squire Hagadorn.

Behind him, flaring out to each side on the store porch, were six watchful

cowboys. On the breast of each man glinted a deputy sheriff's badge.

"Rolf Preston, and you hellions with him, yuh're under arrest for murder!" Blazer's voice blared behind the menacing muzzles of his shotgun. "Come along peaceful or get blowed from under yore hats! Drop them rifles!"

With those deadly twin muzzles threatening death and destruction, there was nothing else to do. The rifles thudded in the dust, hands went up to the level of shoulders.

The herders behind Preston and his men did nothing. They had the New Englander's instinctive respect for authority as typified by those shining badges, and they were further bewildered at the sight of two of their most prominent members standing beside Blazer and wearing those badges.

The staring cattlemen in front of the saloon were likewise taken aback. They shuffled their feet, fumbled with their hands, and glanced at one another askance.

"You fellers 'tend to yore knittin'," Curt Blazer shot at them.

"Yuh can't get away with this, Blazer!" defied the livid-faced Preston. "Yuh ain't got nothin' on us."

A moment later, however, he and his men were disarmed and securely handcuffed.

"Well, I reckon that finishes that," remarked Curt Blazer with great satisfaction. A ringing voice from inside the general store echoed his words.

"No, not quite finished, Blazer! Yuh still got the boss of the outfit to round up—the jigger with the brains, who did the plannin'!"

From the doorway stepped Walt Slade, thumbs hooked over his double cartridge belts. Preston and his drygulchers gulped and goggled at this "dead man" risen from a watery grave.

Slade sauntered down the steps, paying no heed to Preston. His bleak gaze was fixed on the hitch-rack across the street. His voice rang out like the silvery flash of a sword.

"All right, Col Bowers, trail's end!

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

Try tuh answer the five questions below. If yuh miss, our answers are on Page 106—but DON'T LOOK FIRST! Write an' tell us how yuh score, hombres and hombresses! Good luck tuh yuh!

1. Why is a horse always mounted on the left side?
2. What range of hills played a part in the events that led up to the famous Custer massacre?
3. Who was called the "Messiah of the Sioux"?
4. Who was Espinosa?
5. What is a remuda?

Instead of that rich gypsum deposit in Sinkin' Creek Valley, yuh're due for jest six feet of ground two feet wide!"

The crowd was speechless and motionless. Colum Bowers, his face ghastly, his eyes blazing behind the thick lenses of his glasses, stood like a statue beside the hitch-rack.

Then the man who Curt Blazer "doubted had ever had a gunfight in his life" drew with such blinding speed that he shot the wide hat from Walt Slade's head as the Hawk hurled himself sideward and down. Then he crumpled up like a sack of old clothes and lay writhing in the dust, his breast rent and shattered by the bullets from *El Halcon's* blazing guns.

Motioning the crowd to keep back, Walt Slade knelt beside Bowers. The dying outlaw glared up at him with hate-filled eyes.

"Blast yuh!" he panted through lips stained by a bloody froth. "Blast yuh, yuh'll get my pickin's! I told Preston yuh was on our trail—told him yuh always horned into the game and took the pot other men built up—yuh buzzard! I'd oughta done yuh in myself 'stead of leavin' it for Preston to botch."

SLADE leaned closer, his face compassionate. In his cupped hand he held something before Bowers' glazing eyes.

"Mebbe this'll make the out-trail easier, feller," he said softly. "Look!"

The dying outlaw stared at the shining silver star set on a silver circle. His agonized features twitched, smoothed out. The hate left his eyes and his bloody lips moved in a feeble grin.

"Yeah, that makes it—easier!" he panted. "Feller don't have to go out ashamed when the hand that sends him belongs—to—a—ranger!"

Slade laid a handkerchief over the dead face and stood up. The silver star was hidden from view. . . .

"Preston started squawkin', tryin' to save his own skin, when he saw Bowers was dead," Curt Blazer told Slade as the Hawk was tightening Shadow's cinch. "We got plenty to take care of him and his outfit. But, feller, how'd yuh catch onto Bowers in the first place?"

"By his glasses," Slade chuckled. "My experience is that there's usually jest one of two reasons for a feller to wear glasses—bad eyes or a bad reputation. And Bowers didn't have bad eyes."

"How'd yuh know he didn't?"

"That first evenin' at the ranch, when he was signin' me on, he took off his glasses to clean 'em. He held 'em up and I got a good look at the lenses. Them lenses was thick, but they were jest plain window glass, nothin' more. Window glass don't help a feller to see, but they do make his face look different.

"I think yuh'll find Bowers done a term in the penitentiary somewhere—escaped 'fore his time was up, the chances are. He took on a new character for hisself, put books in his room, wore glasses. I got a look at the books. The only ones that had been read was some works on minin' and minerals. The others were fancy ones, but hadn't never been looked into."

"How'd yuh know that?"

Slade grinned. "Well, if a feller's gonna read a book, he has to cut the pages that hasn't been cut apart at the bindery. The pages of Bowers' books hadn't never been cut. And recollect tellin' me yuh figgered Bowers hadn't never used a gun much? Well, I saw first off he wore his gun on the left side, handle to the front, which made him a cross-pull man, and I never seed a cross-pull man who hadn't done a almighty lot of practicin' the draw. It's one of the fastest of all draws, the cross-pull, but one of the hardest to get right.

"That looked funny. Then, too, Bowers was always the feller that brought word of what the herders were goin' to do, jest as Preston was

always the feller that told the herders what the cattlemen was goin' to do. And when I learned yore 'sheepmen' were really Angora goat raisers and couldn't possibly have any use for the valley, I began to see that somebody besides the herders wanted the valley, and didn't want it to raise sheep in, either.

"Angora goats are sorta new in Texas, and most cattlemen don't know their feedin' habits ain't at all the same as sheep. Cowmen lump 'em all together as sheep, and figger 'em all pests. Which made things easy for Preston and Bowers.

"Then I found out all the guns the herders owned were old Winchester forty-fours. And when I saw in town that day I had the run-in with Preston that his men carried thirty-thirties, the tie-up was right clear."

"What did the thirty-thirties have to do with it?"

Walt Slade chuckled, and fumbled a battered bit of lead from his pocket. He held it up for Blazer to see.

"That's the slug I took outa the stock of Uncle Billy's rifle," he explained. "The one what was shot at him from across the river. I saw right away that it come from a small caliber gun, not a regulation forty-four. That was my first clue."

BLAZER nodded thoughtfully. "Right on every count. Preston confessed he brought them gunmen up from the Border. Told the herders it was to protect 'em from the cattlemen. Bowers was in the penitentiary, and got to studyin' about minerals there. He drifted up this way and stumbled onto the gypsum deposit.

"Him and Preston had been pardners and he located him workin' for the herders. Preston brought the herds over to the good goat range here, and then started the row between them and the cattlemen, figgerin' Uncle Billy would get disgusted and sell out to them at their figure. He was right, too. That's jest what woulda happened if you hadn't happened along."

"Rangers don't jest happen along." Slade grinned down at Blazer as he swung into the saddle. "They go where they're needed."

He gazed westward toward where Guadalupe Peak flung its purple spire into the blue Texas sky.

"That's why I'm headed over toward that old pile of rock that's shoulderin' the clouds aside," he concluded. "Cap McNelty said things was happenin' over there, and for me to look into 'em soon as I'd finished this little chore on the Pecos. Tell Uncle Billy so-long for me. He can get rich now and pay everybody bigger wages, which is what he hankers to do, I reckon. *Adios*, feller!"

Into the red and gold of the sunset he rode, and to the listening deputy there floated back, sung in a voice as golden as the sunset, the words of a love song of Old Spain.

NO! NO!

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Vitamin A (Carotene) raises the resistance of mucous membranes of nose and throat to cold infections, when lack of resistance is due to Vitamin A deficiency.

Faro Hiner's Investment in the Cow Town of Buena Vista Brings Him a Rapid-Fire Turnover!

"Drop your gun," she said in a voice that did not tremble

DIVIDEND

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

Author of "Aces—Backed Up," "Reward Circular," etc.

IT SPRAWLED there on the western flats, sort of halfway between the Rainy Mountains and the Texas Panhandle—Buena Vista, which means in English, good view. They called it a cowtown, but it was really just a heat blister on the Oklahoma prairie.

The wind blew most of the time, but it was a hot wind that blew only dust and grit. Dust coated everything, even the undersides of the dry leaves in the cottonwoods down in the creek bottom. Grit and sand were in everything—in the dishes in the cupboards, mixed in the currency in the teller's cage at the bank, even getting into the sad-looking cuts of pie on the

back bar of McDonald's Eat Place.

Every day at noon Banker Kemp complained sourly. Today was no exception.

"Like eating ground glass," he grumbled as a mouthful of peach pie grated between his horselike teeth. "Waitress, why in hell don't McDonald get a counter case to keep his damned pies in?"

He sat in solitary splendor at the table with the red-checked cloth in the front corner by the fly-specked window. This table was always reserved for Zackary Kemp. He liked to keep an eye on his bank directly across the dusty street, even when he was at lunch. A hard man, Zachary Kemp, honest and just, but a close-fisted gent who was by way of being a slave-driver.

He washed down the offending pie with a gulp of tepid milk and essayed another forkful without even looking up at the waitress for an answer. He didn't expect one, and she knew it. There wasn't anything Maggie Barnes could have said if he had. McDonald's method of running his restaurant was his own business. Maggie Barnes was only a drab factotum who worked here for three dollars per week and the privilege of sleeping in the partitioned-off corner of the storeroom at the rear of the place.

Just how long Maggie had worked for McDonald as cook, dish-washer, scrubwoman, and waitress nobody took the trouble to remember. No more than half a dozen people knew her name. She was merely "waitress" or "girl"—even to McDonald himself.

Red of arms, big of knuckles, with stringy, mouse-colored hair, neither pretty nor ugly of face, Maggie Barnes was an established fixture of the eating-house, like the pot-bellied stove in the waiting room of the depot, or an old shoe under the bed. Girl was a misnomer; she was over twenty, and she looked it. Folks paid as much attention to her as to one of the chipped and cracked coffee mugs.

Pat Maple, the ruddy-faced town marshal, crossed the street from the bank and clumped into the restaurant, his spurs jingling like manacles at every step. A six-shooter swayed in the sagging holster on the cartridge-studded gun-belt about his stocky waist. Heavy, solid, substantial, cold blue of eye, Maple was the epitome of frontier law, and he handled his shooting-iron with grim precision.

"Lookin' for yuh, Zack," he greeted the banker, approaching the table and sitting down across from Kemp. "Cup o' coffee and a slab o' pie, girl," he said gruffly in the same tone he would have spoken to his horse. Shoving back his soiled Stetson, he addressed the banker, neither looking up nor saying "thank you" when Maggie silently served him.

"Sheriff Hawley telephoned me from the county seat," he said tersely. "The connection was bad, but I gathered that a crook by the name o' Faro Hiner broke outa jail and was headin' for the Texas line—comin' this way. He tried to break the bank there and got tangled up in a gunfight and got throwed in jail. All the ammunition he's got is in his belt, but he's broke and headin' this way. Yuh know what that might mean."

Kemp's eyes widened slightly. He nodded. "This is the last town this side of the line. Here, girl, take the marshal's food outa this dollar. You mean, Pat, this outlaw might stop by here to stock up."

"Yeah," nodded the marshal. "I never heard of this gent before, but I figgered I better warn yuh. I think I'll ride over toward the county seat —to the hills, anyway — and look around this afternoon."

"What does this Faro Hiner look like?"

"I never seen him," replied Maple. "But Hawley described him as a tall and salty jigger on a roan hoss. He acts pleasant when he's got money, and has a weakness for faro"

"Humph!" grunted Banker Kemp. "That'd fit a lot of men."

"Uh-huh, but not many travelin' light and headin' for Texas."

"Humph!" repeated the banker, raking up the change that the waitress brought him and putting it in a snap pocketbook. "You'd do better, to my way of thinking, to post your deputy marshal and a few citizens around the main street of town and make a gun trap for this outlaw."

"Mebbe, mebbe not," said Maple. "It ain't written that Hiner'll come through Buena Vista. I was just tellin' yuh."

The two of them got up and strode out, brushing unceremoniously past the waitress, never glancing in her direction as she had to step nimbly to get out of the way. A newcomer, who had just crossed the threshold and removed his battered sombrero to slap the dust from it, paused in his action and glanced sharply at the pair. Then his keen glance shifted to the counter as a tall and lanky hombre in ordinary range garb, who had entered the joint just ahead of him, pounded on the bar and yelled, without looking around.

"Hey, girl, fry me some ham and eggs!"

THE waitress brushed a wisp of her mousy hair back from her perspiring forehead with one soap-reddened forearm and hastened toward the kitchen to comply. The newest comer finished his hat-slapping and replaced the sombrero on the back of his head. Ignoring the scowl and annoyed snort of the banker who had to walk through the miniature dust cloud, he eased himself onto the stool at the front of the counter and sat there.

He was a fairly clean-shaven chap with keen gray eyes and two laugh-lines bracketing his wide, firm mouth. Without appearing to do so, he took in pretty well every one of the half-dozen or so patrons of the place. Without raising his own voice for service, he just sat there and waited as the harried waitress and cook was summoned from one place to another with scant courtesy.

At last she came to the front end of the counter.

"What's yours, Mister?" she asked, slightly out of breath. "Sorry it took me so long."

"Don't mention it," he said, smiling. "Yuh seem to be kinda short o' help, Ma'am."

"Mr. McDonald had to go down to the feed and grain store for a sack of oats for his riding horse," she began. "He ran out this morning. He sets a heap of store by that animal—keeps him in a special shed out back. He'll be back here soon. What'll you have—"

Maggie didn't add that the black gelding's shed was a better bedroom than her own, or that Wilkes McDonald gave more attention to his horse than to his help. She never even thought of it.

"Nev' mind apologizin', Ma'am," said the stranger. "I ain't impatient. Just fry me a steak and some potatoes—"

"Hey, girl!" the lanky chap down the counter called curtly. "Gimme some more bread."

"—when yuh find the time," finished the patient customer.

Maggie stared at him in disbelief. His pleasant voice, respectful address, and kindly, unhurried manner were a novelty to her. Why—why, he was actually treating her like a human being instead of a food-serving machine. She hurried away, a faint and unwonted flush pinking her sallow cheeks.

In a moment the sound of frying meat and the aroma of sizzling onions came from the kitchen. Customers came and went in a slow stream, keeping the overworked woman on the hop. She served the stranger between jumps, but he didn't complain. The dinner trade was just beginning to slacken when McDonald returned,

staggering under a gunny sack of oats.

The proprietor's pop eyes took in the general disorder of the house, the various piles of soiled dishes and scattered chairs, and he snarled at the overworked young woman as he tramped through to the rear.

"What makes yuh so slow, girl? Clean up the dishes. The place looks like a pig pen. Zack Kemp's table ain't even cleared off yet."

"Yes, sir, right away, Mr. McDonald," panted the factotum, hastening out from behind the counter to comply with the order.

The patient stranger arose from his stool and fished one sinewy hand into a pocket that did not jingle. He brought it forth with a lone silver dollar which he contemplated for a sober minute, a smile about his lips. He stepped over to the table where Maggie was stacking dishes.

"They dang near work you to death, don't they, Ma'am?" he said gently.

MAGGIE BARNES straightened and wiped her hands to accept payment for his meal. Her eyes were suspiciously bright. And then before she realized what was happening, he gathered her in his arms and kissed her full on the mouth. Almost at once he released her and stepped back one step.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," he said, unashamed and without apology. "I just had to do it. Did anybody ever tell yuh that yuh got nice brown eyes?"

She just stood there, quivering all over from shock, staring up at him and dumbly shaking her head.

"Well, yuh have. And if yuh'll do up yore hair yuh'll be downright pretty. Here's a dollar, Ma'am. Keep the change yoreself and buy a hair ribbon."

Without another word, like a breeze from another world, he turned and strode jauntily out of the restaurant. Maggie Barnes stared after him strangely. Then she pressed trembling fingers against her lips which still tingled from the firmness of his kiss. Then she stared down at the silver dollar, and couldn't see it for the tears.

The long afternoon dragged to a close. Maggie managed to get the dishes washed, the eating room swept up, and a big pot of stew on for the supper hour. McDonald wasn't much help, spending most of the afternoon dozing in his comfortable armchair behind the cigar counter, until Zachary Kemp came over after banking hours and took the restaurant owner out to join the posse of citizens patrolling the town.

Maggie Barnes did not mind all this. For the first time that she could remember the day didn't drag. Somehow, the hours slipped by on a golden thread. There was an inner glow about her heart that warmed her. A strange alchemy was at work, and she didn't mind the curt orders or utter indifference of the occasional customers.

McDonald took his sawed-off shotgun and followed Kemp. The restaurant keeper took up his position at the head of the straggling street just before the road dipped down to the creek ford. He left his six-shooter in its accustomed place with the reserve toothpicks under the back end of the lunch counter.

Zachary Kemp had some justification for his excitement. A roan horse had been discovered by Deputy Marshal Peel at the livery barn. The holster, not being on the lookout for such an animal, had paid little attention to the rider. He was a tall and lean gent dressed in regular range garb, and that was all the hostler could remember.

"A dickens of a note," snarled Kemp anxiously. "A strange roan horse in the stable, the rider loose somewhere in town, and Maple out riding around in the brush."

"Likely no call to git excited," opined Deputy Peel. "Yore bank

wasn't bothered, and she's shut up now for the night. We jest ain't takin' any chances."

And Mr. Peel, it seemed, was right. McDonald returned to his restaurant at sundown, very much disgruntled. No sign of the stranger or of danger had been manifest. He found Maggie Barnes actually humming to herself as she served the early diners.

"What in tarnation's got into yuh, girl?" he demanded, standing his gun in the corner and taking his place behind the cigar counter.

But Maggie didn't know, and if she had, she couldn't have told him. So she simply fell silent, abashed, and hurried about her duties.

TWILIGHT had fallen and the lamps were lighted when a six-gun cut loose at the far end of the street. In an instant there was a chorus of bellowing weapons. Men shouted and began running along the street. All interest in food ceased immediately.

Then there was a jingle of spurs at the threshold, and the competent, stocky figure of Deputy Marshal Peel loomed out of the dark.

"McDonald!" he called out crisply. "Grab yore shotgun and run back to the ford. It's Faro Hiner, all right. I think we've got 'im cornered at the livery barn, but if he makes a break for the hills he'll have to hit the ford, and you stop him! Savvy?"

McDonald savvied. He grabbed up his terrible weapon and lit out. The deputy turned sharply to the waitress.

"Any stranger eatin' in here today, girl?" he demanded.

"Yes," she answered truthfully. "Two of them. They both came in at noon just before Mr. Maple and Mr. Kemp went out."

"Noon? Shucks, that was too early. But was one of 'em tall and lean lookin'?"

"Yes, sir. He sat halfway down the counter and ordered some fried ham and eggs.

With a curse that included not a word of thanks, the worried deputy marshal wheeled about and ran along the street toward the sound of the gun fracas. The rest of the diners bolted after him, hot with the mob lust to be in at the kill. Left alone, Maggie stood at the counter and stared blankly out into the night.

She was standing there when she detected movement of a furtive sort out in the dark beyond the fly-specked window. Then, before she had time to move, a man lurched into the restaurant and started toward the rear at a staggering run. The left shoulder of his shirt was red with blood, and a grotesque trail of it dripped behind him.

But that didn't startle her. It was his white and strained looking face. This was the man who had kissed her!

"Is there a back way out?" he fairly snapped at her.

She could only stand there at the back end of the counter and nod her head dumbly. This typical action seemed to straighten him up with a jerk. He stopped short, braced himself against the counter beside her and essayed a weak smile. He even removed his hat.

"Excuse the roughness, Ma'am," he said. "It's hard to be polite when a feller's tryin' to slip out of a gun-trap."

"You!" she exclaimed. "You're—Faro Hiner!"

"At yore service, Ma'am."

"Oh!" she cried. "The escaped jailbird from the county seat! The bank robber!"

"There ain't no bank robber, Ma'am," he said, turning his head to stare anxiously out toward the street. "Just a jailbreaker and one wrongly put in prison, Ma'am. Sorry I have to use yore house to get through, leavin' such a mess for yuh to clean up, but they winged me when they shot my hoss. They've got a cordon around the stable and at both ends of the street, and the banker and the

deputy marshal are combin' the alleys on the other side."

Maggie Barnes snapped out of her stunned condition. She grabbed him by the good arm.

"Quick!" she said. "Come back to the kitchen. Let me see how bad you're wounded."

"Nothin' but a scratch, Ma'am. I can plug it when I get outa here."

"Get out? Without a horse you can't escape. Where would you go?"

"I'm headin' for Texas, Ma'am. I'll pick up another hoss somewhere."

A MADNESS seized Maggie. She tugged at him, leading him through the kitchen to the shed out in back. A soft whicker came from the tiny corral adjacent thereto, and a velvety muzzle was thrust over the bars.

"Quick!" the girl cried. "Saddle McDonald's black and ride. Head straight south till the curving creek cuts your path. Swim it, and turn west. You can make the line before daylight. Here, let me help you!"

Between them they saddled the gelding in record time, and the fugitive was in the kak.

"I don't know how to thank yuh, Ma'am, but I'll shore send this hoss back as soon as I get to Wichita Falls. I ain't a hoss thief, either."

"Don't thank me—ride!" she said sharply.

He bent down suddenly and lifted her high with his good arm. He planted a second kiss squarely on her mouth, let her down gently, and then wheeled the great black gelding. With a clatter of hoofs he was gone in the night.

Maggie Barnes, her senses reeling, her blood coursing wildly through her veins, ran back through the kitchen and reached the rear end of the lunchroom just as a trio of men came tearing in through the front doorway. Deputy Peel was in the lead, gun in hand, following the trail of blood with the alert air of a foxhound. Behind him crowded Banker Kemp and McDonald.

"Where is he, girl?" roared McDonald, brandishing his shotgun. "We tracked him here."

"Speak, girl!" growled the banker. "Is he still in the house?"

Whether or not the girl was in any danger did not seem to occur to them. Peel didn't say a word. His eyes followed the splattered blood, trailed it to the little pool at the end of the counter and lighted upon the smeared top of the bar where Hiner had rested his hand. He went into a deadly crouch at this sight and faced the black mouth of the kitchen doorway.

"Get outa the way, girl!" he now spoke harshly.

Maggie moved to the end of the counter by the reserve stock of toothpicks. At this instant there was the tinkle of spurs out front, and the heavy thud of running feet. Across the threshold came the solid figure of Marshal Maple.

"Hey!" the marshal yelled. "You, Tom Peel! What the hell yuh doin'? Can't I leave town without yuh goin' crazy and—"

At this final evidence of authority Maggie Barnes went mad. She reached beneath the counter and snatched up McDonald's .45 Colt from among the toothpicks. She leveled it on Deputy Peel, but her eyes and her voice commanded all of them.

"Drop your guns!" she said in a hard voice which did not tremble. "Every one of you or, God help me, I'll kill Tom Peel!"

Marshal Maple went rigid, halted behind the trio of men. He slowly turned his eyes from his deputy to look at the woman. Too seasoned a man not to recognize steel in a voice when he heard it, he made no overt move. McDonald began to yell in anger. Kemp bellowed in annoyance, while Deputy Peel started to try a sneak swivel.

"Drop yore guns, yuh fools!" ordered Maple tersely. "Can't yuh see

she means business?" His was the first weapon to hit the floor.

The action of the doughty marshal convinced them. Cursing, the trio of manhunters followed suit.

"Damn you, girl!" snarled the banker. "You're aiding and abetting a bank robber. What the hell—"

"Shut up!" ordered Maggie Barnes, arcing her gun with a steady hand. "Sit down in a row on these stools and put both hands on top the counter—all four of you!"

"Do as she says, men," advised Marshal Maple, a hard grin about his firm lips as he looked at the woman as though he were seeing her for the first time. He was again the first to obey the order.

DEPUTY PEEL complied with sullen grace, casting an uneasy glance toward the blackness of the kitchen doorway.

"He won't get away, nohow," he assured the banker. "He's wounded and afoot. We'll get him."

"Just why—" began the marshal.

"Be quiet!" cried the girl, backing away from the counter so that none of them could make a lucky lunge for her gun. She watched the four of them narrowly as they lined up like bad boys at the counter. Many a time they had sat like this before this very counter and this same waitress, but never to be served an order of hot lead.

"You just think he won't get away!" cried the girl proudly. "He isn't as badly wounded as you think, and he's mounted on Wilkes McDonald's black gelding in exchange for the horse you killed."

"What!" shouted McDonald, starting to his feet, and promptly subsiding as the girl's trigger knuckle whitened and the gun swung toward his midriff.

"Yes, on your horse!" she exclaimed. "And he's not a bank robber. He's only a jailbreaker—one who shouldn't have been in prison. He'll send back your horse as soon as he gets to Texas. Don't you dare call him a bank robber, Zachary Kemp! He never went near your old bank. And whichever one of you who shot him and killed his horse is a murderer!"

Deputy Peel lowered his eyes at this. Marshal Maple only smiled to himself. Vehemently, the enraged girl went on.

"We're going to wait like this for ten more minutes, and you'd better pray that nobody else comes in to mess things up, or I'll — I'll start shooting."

"Pat Maple," burst out the banker angrily, but not moving a muscle beside his mouth, "are you gonna sit here like a knot on a log and let this girl hold us while a criminal gets away?"

"We'll sit quiet, girl," said Marshal Maple in a mild voice. "I give yuh my solemn word we'll sit put for ten minutes. Now, get control of yoreself. Yuh don't wanna hang for doin' any promiscuous shootin' on yore own hook."

"Say!" began Zachary Kemp uglily. "What the—"

"Keep yore shirt on, Zack," ordered Maple curtly. "We sit here like I promised, no matter who comes in. The girl is right about the bank. And I don't aim to get shot by a crazy woman. Yuh can put yore gun down, girl. Yuh've got my word. Now, who started this manhunt while I was gone?"

"I'll keep the gun," said Maggie tensely. "And all of you keep plumb quiet."

McDonald and Kemp fairly boiled in their own juice. Deputy Peel, taking his cue from his superior, relaxed and sat quietly. Maple looked as though he was inwardly chuckling at a little joke of his own, but he made no attempt to talk.

The minutes dragged by on leaden feet. Finally reaction set in for the girl, and she started swaying. The tears began trickling down her cheeks

while her four prisoners stared at her in astonishment.

"Listen, girl," said Maple gently. "Since yuh won't lemme talk, just answer me one question, will yuh? Just tell me why yuh've done this."

"Why?" she cried, and began to laugh hysterically. "I'll tell you why! Because Faro Hiner kissed me. Because he treated me like a lady instead of a stick of wood! Because he even took off his hat when he staggered in so badly shot and scared that he could hardly stand up! That's why I did it—and I'm glad! Now, go on out and try to catch him, with him mounted on McDonald's black. Put me in jail, too if you want to, and see if I care."

The girl threw down the .45 on the counter, covered her face with her work-reddened hands, and burst into violent sobbing. McDonald reached out to grab up the gun, halted as Marshal Maple's quiet voice broke through the sound of crying.

"The girl is right, men," he said queerly. "Faro Hiner wasn't no bank robber. He ain't even an outlaw. I stopped at Cedar Junction late this afternoon and called Sheriff Hawley back.

"Hiner tried to break the bank at faro over to the county seat. When he found the dealer was cheatin' him, he started a fight, shot the dealer. They put him in jail before they found out the facts of the case. While they were investigating, Hiner escaped. The news got around of the escape before they proved him innocent. Hawley said the gambler'll recover, and to let Faro Hiner go. But, if yuh still wanna chase him for hoss-stealin' now, hop to it."

Shamed, their faces flushed as red as Maggie Barnes' hands, the trio glanced at each other guiltily. Then, with one accord, they got up and retrieved their weapons. Like whipped dogs, silently, they marched out the front door. Even the marshal felt the general discomfiture as he glanced once more at the woman as though he had never seen her before. Then he slowly followed the others.

And not a man rode after the fleeing gentleman.

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FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

TEXAS RANGER DARING

A Complete Novel by BRADFORD SCOTT

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Sweet and Low Down

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Author of "Hangin' Day," "Lawmen Lead," etc.

Rusty smashed the stock down on the outlaw's head

Old Rusty Practices Using a Knife and Fork—But He Gets Proddy When It Comes to Swallowing Insults!

OLD RUSTY was a little sad as he sat on the pine log in his camp and measured out each pint fruit jar of gold dust and small nuggets. This camp had been home to him for five years, the longest he had ever stayed at one place. Pannings had been fair and Rusty had finally begun to realize that he was getting old.

The realization of that fact had come as a sudden shock to him the last time he had gone to town with a jar of dust. He had headed for the nearest bar to wash the trail dirt out of his throat. As he finished emptying a half-pint flask down his dry throat at one drink, he suddenly saw a white-haired old scarecrow eying him narrowly.

He looked at the creature for a long moment, studying the mat of white hair, the wrinkled parchment face and the yellow-stained white beard that hadn't been trimmed since it was black. The sun-reddened eyes were looking squarely back at him. Rusty licked his lips. The creature facing him was a terrible example of what happened to men who spent their lives in search of gold. A typical, worn-out old desert rat.

Rusty snorted the creature in disgust. And the creature snorted back at him!

It was a whole minute before

Rusty recognized the man. His own reflection was staring back at him from the backbar mirror.

That had been a horrible shock to Rusty, and it had taught him a lesson. It was such a shock, in fact, that for the first time in over fifty years, he headed back to the mountains with his groceries and with some of his gold dust left.

That experience five years ago had so shaken him that it completely changed his life.

"I reckon I'm bein' a traitor to the honorable perfession of prospectin'," he said to himself. "And I shore hope nobody comes along and sees me. But I got to do somethin' about it. I ain't a-gonna waste my life."

So the change had come about. After Rusty had filled another pint Ball-Mason jar with dust, he broke the first traditional rule of his life. Instead of breaking camp and heading for town, he started filling another jar. That started another habit. He would look guiltily along the trail for his isolated camp, to assure himself that there were no observers. Then he would go down to the stream and hurriedly wash his face, just to get in practice, against the day when he was ready to quit....

HE HAD saved the gold that he panned. The amount of it would never make him rich, but slowly the fruit jars of dust had accumulated. Rusty had gone to town when necessary to buy groceries, and had bought a bottle of soda instead of heading for the saloon.

Moreover, he had settled down and built himself a home. Daily after he had labored panning the stream, he had come in to get his ax. He had cut pine saplings with it and erected himself a lean-to against the hillside, and had taken to sleeping under a roof. He had gone out and picked wild greens to boil up with squirrels and rabbits he had shot, and he had found bee-trees and robbed them of their wild honey. He was practising living in a civilized manner.

In five years he had finally reached his objective. He had about two hundred ounces of gold dust. He estimated that would buy him a new pair of overalls, a Stetson hat, a pair of hand-sewn, real cowboy boots, and enough to buy his room and vittles for the rest of his days.

Because of right living and hard work, Rusty was ready to retire and become a civilized man. It was against all tradition, but Rusty was an individualist. Let the other prospectors condemn him and be damned. By figuring as closely as he could, he figured he was sixty or seventy years old and had a right to live as he pleased.

Rusty was a little sad, for this was his last day in the place that had been home for five years. He sat and measured out his accumulated dust into fruit jars, and packed them away in a wooden box. Meanwhile, his last dinner of squirrel and greens was simmering over the fire outside his pine lean-to.

He was so engrossed in his business that for the first time in his life, he did not hear the horse approaching until it was almost up to the camp. Then it was too late for him to hide his dust. Nor did he have time to rush into the lean-to and bring out his old single-action pistol.

His visitor broke into the clearing, a dark-visaged man on horseback. He rode a disreputable-looking horse that was caked with dried sweat. His left arm hung down stiffly from a shoulder which was covered with browned bloodstains. In his right hand he held a rifle.

There was nothing Rusty could do about his gold except to let it stay and hope the man was not too inquisitive. But it was his whole fortune—

"Howdy, pilgrim," Rusty greeted him. "Light and rest yore saddle."

The rider spat, without thanks for

the invitation. He looked at the fruit jars of gold, all lined up on the ground. Then he looked around at the camp.

"Nice place yuh got here," he observed, without any particular friendliness. "Have many visitors?"

Direct, just like that. It made Rusty nervous, but he did not show it.

"Yep. Folks drops in quite frequent."

"Plumb out of the way to be havin' visitors," the man remarked unbelievingly. "Anyway, can yuh bandage a wound? Feller got in my way a ways back and his gun exploded. It won't any more. I'm Sim Carson. That's why."

"Reckon I can fix yuh up," the old man said.

Rusty saw that Carson did not put the weapon in the saddle-boot. He knew there was little he could do if the man got rough with him. Besides, Rusty's natural hospitality made itself felt. Carson had been shot and needed attention.

"Shore, I'll do what I can," he added. "Let me look at it. Reckon yuh're hungry, too."

"I could eat," Carson answered. He slid off his horse stiffly, proving to Rusty that he had been in saddle for a long, hard stretch. The sweat-caked horse verified this. Carson stared past the neat little camp. "Ain't yuh got no hosses here?"

"Nope, just a couple of mules about as old as I am."

Rusty looked at his mules down by the creek, almost out of sight in the woods. When he looked back, he was staring down the muzzle of a gun.

"We might as well savvy each other, hombre," the man said coldly. "I jest robbed the bank down at Oak Springs, and I killed two men doin' it. I've rid far and hard, and I ain't in no humor for no arguments. I want yuh to wash and tie up my shoulder, and I want some vittles. Then yuh're gonna tie that gold dust I see yuh panned out for me on one of them mules. Then I gotta have some rest. But before I go to sleep, I'm either gonna tie yuh up, or else shut yuh up so I'll be shore yuh won't be up to no tricks. It's up to you."

"I won't give yuh no argument," Rusty said. "I can always get some more gold, but I can't do it dead."

"That's bein' smart. Now get busy."

Under the threatening muzzle of Carson's gun, Rusty went about his job of bandaging the wounded shoulder. The wound was only superficial and was not dangerous. He had little trouble fixing it up, despite Carson's angry curses as he swabbed it.

"Now get my saddle off my hoss. Take him down to water and put a tether rope on him."

AS RUSTY obeyed the command, the man hovered over him.

"And don't let yore hands stick to the saddle-bag," Carson threatened. "There's plenty of greenbacks in that —a whole bankful."

With his captor following him with leveled gun, Rusty watered the horse and tied him out to graze.

"And now some food," Carson ordered.

Rusty got out a tin plate, cup, knife and fork, another pair of civilized instruments he was practising on.

"Kinda swanky for a prospector, ain't yuh?" the man asked as he saw the implements. "Yuh runnin' a Harvey House out here?"

Rusty ignored the ridicule, though his face turned red under his stained whiskers. He poured out a heaping plate of savory stew and set it on a box in front of Carson, who squatted on his heels. Carson lifted the plate and smelled of it, saw the cooked rabbit meat and the boiled greens.

"Yuh're the most locoed prospector I ever seen," he said. "Whoever heard of the likes of you, eatin' like a railroad eatin' house? Ain't got no ice cream for dessert, have yuh?"

"No, but I got some plumb tasteful

wild honey," Rusty answered. "Found a bee-trap the other day. Got me a two-gallon bucket full."

"Bring me the bucket," Carson ordered. "I like my vittles drowned in sweetnin'."

Rusty brought the zinc bucket, heavy with its thick wild honey. Carson laid his gun down on the box and lifted his plate with his uninjured hand.

"Pour it on till I tell yuh to stop."

"All right," Rusty said. "You asked for it."

HE POURED the honey—but not on the plate of food. He turned the bucket upside-down over the man's head, after shoving his hat off. The heavy, sticky stuff filled Carson's hair, ran down his face and blinded his eyes. It streamed down the collar of his shirt and into the hair on his chest. The robber let out a yell and jumped to his feet, clawing at his blinded eyes.

At the same instant; Rusty kicked the box away. The gun lying on it slid into the dust, out of Carson's frantic reach. Rusty dived for the rifle.

Sensing what he was doing, Carson quit clawing at his sticky face and dived on top of Rusty. Rusty got his hand on the gun just as Carson caught his wrist. They fought and rolled in the dirt, the man's wounded arm just about offsetting the lack of strength in the aged prospector.

But Rusty was fighting for more than possession of the gun. His gold dust—his retirement—was in jeopardy. He was fighting for his new overalls and hand-stitched boots. Seeing his dreams about to crash down on his head gave him a vitality he hadn't known for years. Rusty fought like a demon.

They were both saturated with the honey as they rolled in the dirt. The soil stuck to their clothes until they both looked like great lumps of mud.

Then with one superhuman effort, Rusty wrenched free. They both stood up at the same instant. But Rusty had the advantage of vision. He snatched up the rifle and smashed down the stock on Carson's head. His sense of hospitality had been outraged. Besides, Carson had ridiculed him for having knives and forks in his camp. His anger knew no bounds.

Instantly Carson was knocked senseless, a sprawling gob of honey, dirt and gravel. Unconsciously, he lay panting, all the fight taken out of him.

"I reckon that'll teach yuh how to make fun of a man's hospitality," Rusty said.

He got to his feet and set about methodically tying the man up, making sure that the stolen bank money was safe. Then he packed his gold dust onto his pack burro.

"Jest for yore orneriness, I'm a-gonna ride yore hoss back to Oak Springs. Yuh're ridin' my other pack mule — belly-down across him. I reckon there must be a good reward out for yuh. Mebbe I'll buy me a silk shirt with some of it, then add the leavin's to my pile."

FINALLY Rusty was ready to head for town and his long-awaited retirement. He looked at his clothes, saw that he was in just as sticky and muddy condition as was his prisoner. He thought this over for a long moment.

Then he resolutely brought out a clean pair of faded overalls from his pack. He walked down the trail a distance and listened for a long time. Hearing no sound which would hint of any more approaching visitors, he came back and picked up the overalls.

With a determined step and a defiantly jutting jaw, he marched down to the stream and took a bath.

Rip-Roaring Yarns by BRADFORD SCOTT, REEVE WALKER, SYL MACDOWELL *and Many Others Coming Next Issue!*

A Complete Swap and Whopper Novelet

The Last

When the Two Wandering Waddies Go Into the Canned Gravy Business, They Just Naturally End Up In the Soup!

CHAPTER I

A Tough Range

ON A stump by the open gate of an empty corral sat a man with an ax across his knees. He was a sad, stooped man, with a strip of fresh court-plaster covering a swollen bruise on his forehead. He scarcely looked up as two strangers reined up beside him. The ax handle was split, and he was mending it with wrappings of haywire.

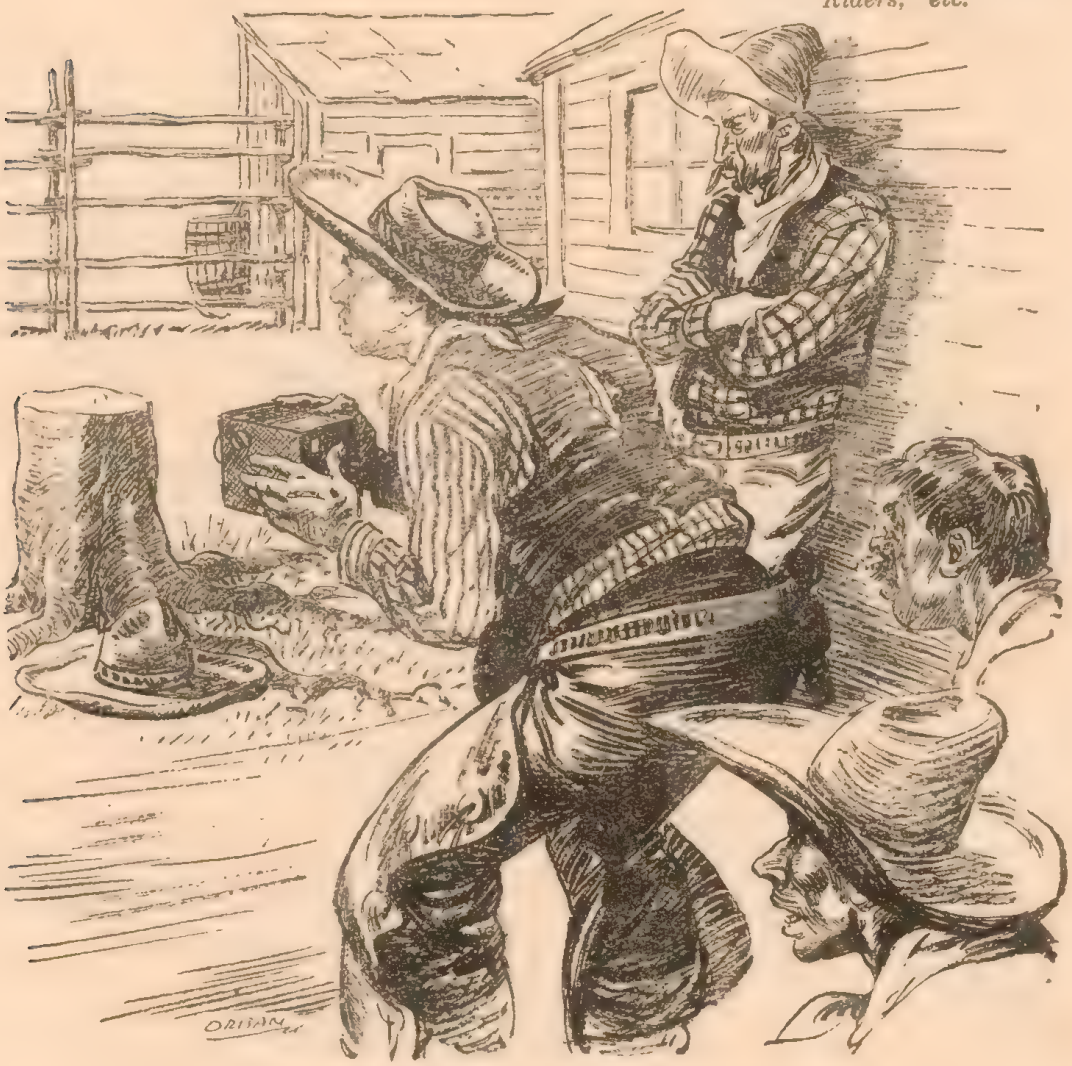
"Swap" Bootle and "Whopper" Whaley were not discouraged by this unenthusiastic welcome. Nobody was ever very glad to see them. It was only when they left that folks rejoiced. They were penniless roamsteaders and looked the part in their trail-worn get-up.

"We're lookin' for Mr. Hump Benders, who owns this here Bull Creek Ranch," spoke up the lean, hungry-looking Whopper as he twisted around in saddle to pull a slab of plugcut out of his hip pocket.

"I'm him," the man on the stump grunted curtly, "but I ain't hirin' no cowhands."

Groundup

By SYL MacDOWELL
Author of "Hosses Are Here to Stay," "The Phony Express Riders," etc.



Poison Oakley was chasing Whopper with ferocious whoops

The partners greeted that statement with relief instead of disappointment. Work was the last thing on earth that they wanted. Their present object was to cotton up to "Hump" Benders in hopes that he would invite them to light and eat. It was nearly noon, and appetizing aromas drifted out of the nearby cookshack.

Whopper bit off a hunk of plugcut to oil up his conversational powers. It looked like Hump Benders would need strong persuading. As he pondered for an agreeable opening, the busy blue eyes in Swap's shiny, pumpkin-round face went from the split ax handle to the court-plaster on the rancher's forehead.

"Looks like yuh had a little ax-ident," he quipped with an amiable grin.

Hump Benders was in no mood for flipperies. He looked up, one eye swollen nearly shut.

"D'yuh imagine I'd wallop myself

on the head on purpose?" he asked crossly.

"I can't imagine how else it happened," Swap admitted. "Though I'm mighty sorry. That looks like a good ax, or was."

This sympathetic overture failed to impress Hump Benders. He got to

Whopper

his feet and laid the ax on the stump, because just then a white-aproned figure appeared at the doorway of the cookshack, walloping a dishpan, and yelling:

"Come and git it afore I throw it out!"

HUMP BENDERS paused just a moment.

"I'll enlighten yore curiosity to this extent," he grunted. "I roped a beef steer and tied it here and went to poleax it, bein' in need of ranch meat. The ax, it bounced back. The steer hightailed off with my rope. Anything else yuh want to know?"

"That must of been a mighty tough beef critter."

"Tough? Man, here on Bull Creek we don't raise nothin' else but tough cows and tougher cowpunchers. Our beef, it's the toughest in the world. It's so tough, inside and out, that nobody'll buy it! Nobody can eat it. I'll tell yuh how tough it is. The cook, yonder, has fixed ground-up meatballs for dinner. When the outfit gets done lickin' the gravy offen 'em, they could go out and knock home runs with 'em!"

Having that off his chest, Hump Benders started for the cookshack. Swap made a gesture of despair and faced his pardner. Unless Whopper produced an inspiration out of the chew that he had going now, they would be turned away, with nothing but their hunger for information satisfied.

Whopper rose to the occasion with a statement that halted Hump Benders in his tracks.

"Mr. Benders, d'yuh reelize that yuh got a fortune in yore easy reach?"

The rancher stared with his one good eye.

"Jest how," he inquired tartly, "would yuh suggest that I grab hold of it?"

Whopper lopped one long leg over his saddle horn and spit sociably over a bony shoulder.

"From what yuh say, I got a notion yore cook is a purty good gravy maker."

"The best ever. Leaves little gobs of flour in it. Calls 'em mock mushrooms. Why?"

"There yuh have it," Whopper declared.

"Have what?"

"Yore fortune. Though I reckon I could explain better if I had a taste of yore cook's gravy."

Hump Benders thought it over carefully before he committed himself to an invitation. When he did, it was with a jerk of the thumb, and then he resumed his uncheerful perambulation toward the cookshack.

"Let's go," said Whopper.

The partners dismounted nimbly, tied their horses at the feed-rack inside the corral, and chased after their host.

"Yuh got a great mind, Whopper," congratulated Swap.

"Not only that, but I got a million-

dollar idea," Whopper declared mysteriously.

Swap was vaguely disturbed by this assurance.

"Jest so yuh don't go too far with it," he warned. "Don't forget, yore ideas have got us in some purty serious mix-ups."

Whopper revealed no more just then. They entered the cookshack. Already the boss and some of his riders were seated, voraciously attacking heaped, steaming platters. Swap and Whopper slid onto the vacant end of a bench by the doorway.

Conversation languished as they joined hungry men in stuffing themselves. Whopper wisely waited until the psychological moment, when they had finished and were fingering shirt pockets for the makings.

THEN he began.

"Mr. Benders," he said, "when me and my pardner rode up yuh took us for stray cowpokes, lookin' for a job, didn't yuh?"

Their host scoured his tinplate clean with a final morsel of bread.

"I took yuh for a pair of saddle bums," he stated baldly.

Whopper poked out his skinny chest with an effort at dignity.

"Me, I happen to be a surplus engineer."

"Jest what," Hump Benders inquired, "is a surplus engineer?"

"A expert who converts surplus into shortages, or vice-versy."

A young puncher with squinty, calculating eyes that were focused through the doorway on the partners' horses in the corral spoke up.

"The world's goods ain't distributed proper, that's a cinch."

"Mebbe yuh got some plan for convertin' my surplus of rawhide beef into a shortage of worries," suggested Hump Benders.

"Yessir, exackly what I'm leadin' up to. Now that I've sampled the high-class skill o' yore cook"—Whopper saluted that gawping onlooker with his fork—"I've hit on a way to sell Bull Creek beef at a big profit."

Hump Benders propped his elbows on the table and became interested. The outfit lingered to hear the rest. Whopper's speech was briefly interrupted by the arrival of one latecomer. The bench creaked as he

Swap

eased down on it, shoving Swap and Whopper tightly together as he made way for his massive framework.

Whopper flicked an awed side glance at him. He saw a hog-nosed hombre with large, red ears that spread like magnificent moose antlers. With an arm as thick and hard-looking as a fencepost he reached out for a platter of meatballs sloshed over with gravy. A man that big would scoop the platter clean. Whopper jabbed out with his fork to get one more before they vanished.

"Yuh're as good as a millionaire right now, Mr. Benders," he went on smoothly, as he speared down sharply.

The giant beside him went up in the air with a roar that nearly lifted the roof off the cookshack.

"Owooo!" he exploded.

He grabbed Whopper around the neck and lifted him clear of the bench.

"Set down and listen!" Hump Benders rapped out.

The huge man relaxed his hold.

Limp and purple-faced, Whopper dropped back on the bench.

"This here's Poison Oakley, my tophand," explained Hump Benders. "He riles easy. Now go ahead. As yuh was sayin'—"

"This long-legged grasshopper forked my hand and had it on his plate with gravy on it before I could holler!" bellowed "Poison" Oakley. "I oughter whale him till the rivets drop out of his levi pants!"

Whopper felt of his neck to find if it was broken.

"Yuh better reconsider that, my friend," he gasped. "Or else I won't put yore picture on the cans."

"What cans?" Hump Benders demanded.

Whopper pulled himself together and sprung the grand climax.

"The cans that'll contain the greatest boon of the century to overworked housewives all over the country," he piped. "Stores will be sellin' it soon by carloads. Gents, I give to the waitin' world—Bull Creek Canned Gravy!"

CHAPTER II

Pouring It on Thick

IN THE presence of this epochal announcement, Hump Benders glanced around from one to the other and looked quite thoughtful.

"Yuh mean, instead o' sellin' beef on the hoof, I sell larrup?" he asked.

"We'll turn this cookshack into the world's first gravy factory," declared Whopper.

"I was scared of that," the cook croaked dismally.

"And you'll be the master gravy-maker, a honor that most cooks would jump at," Whopper told him.

"I don't jump good on forty a month, and that owin'," said the cook.

"Yuh're raised to forty-one fifty and shut up," Whopper said witheringly. "Don't yuh realize that women folks don't like to make gravy? It means they stand over a hot stove, after they've got a meal all fixed and ready, stirrin' up a batch in a skillet. Don't yuh reelize that yuh'll be a bigger idol to women folks than all the handsome movie stars stacked together?"

Whopper had hit on the objector's weak spot. The cook's eyes glowed. He cherished secret romantic yearnings.

"Will I get fan letters?"

"By the wagonload!"

"Then how about puttin' my picture on the cans?"

Poison Oakley knocked out Whopper's breath with an elbow.

"Ezzur my pizzur onumerelse!" he blurted through a mouthful of food.

"I get can credit or I quit," argued the cook.

Swap came to the rescue with a quickly-thought-out compromise.

"What sells gravy is what's needed on the labels. I'd say Mr. Oakley's picture'd be the best advertisin'. Along with the cook's testimonial, sayin' that feedin' him Bull Creek Gravy made him the gee-walloper that he is."

That seemed to satisfy everybody except Hump Benders.

"Heck, any pot-rassler can make gravy."

"There's where the art of surplus control comes in," Whopper informed him. "We can let on that some mystery of grass or water or climate supplies Bull Creek beef with new and powerful vitamins."

Poison Oakley gulped down a mouthful.

"If that's a fancy word for maggots, and yuh let on that I eat fly-blowed grub, I'll knock yuh loose from yore dew-claws!" he threatened.

"Somebody's got to think up a batch of advertisin' slogans," Whopper said hastily, wishing he knew what vitamins were so he could calm down Poison Oakley.

"I'm gonna have a confab with you when I get done," the giant growled.

"How about 'Cheat the Grave with Bull Creek Gravy'?" suggested the cook.

"Or signboards that say, 'Bellow for Bull Creek Gravy'," put in the shrewd-eyed puncher at the far end of the table. He was still looking out toward the corral.

"Them's fine slogans." Whopper nodded approvingly. "Make a note of 'em, Mr. Benders."

Hump Benders ran a hand across his unimaginative, court-plastered brow.

"Where we goin' to get the tin cans?" he demanded practically.

"There's a million empties in the gully back of the cookshack," the cook pointed out. "I been pryin' 'em open for years. But I never could figger how they got 'em sealed up after the stuff was put inside. A good deal like puttin' together a busted egg, it seems to me."

POISON OAKLEY stabbed fiercely at a meatball. It skidded from his plate and bounced under the table. It wasn't worth going after, he decided. So he speared a hot potato, instead, and poked it into his mouth, whole.

"Somethin's got to be done with the waste product or we'll get drove out by buzzards," said the cook.

"Ground up meat makes good fertilizer," observed Swap.

"That ain't a very tasty side line for a gravy factory," objected the master mind of the canned gravy industry.

"Ooozone keshacowz?" mumbled Poison Oakley through a faceful of hot potato.

Whopper looked puzzled. Hump Benders translated it.

"He says, "Who's going to catch the cows?' We have a hard time roundin' 'em up. Our stock is so tough they sharpen their horns on rocks, and chase bears."

"I bet Mr. Oakley can rassle in the gristle," said Swap.

The big tophand rolled a grateful eye. Swap was getting along fine with this dangerous-looking monster. Poison Oakley lifted a cup of coffee and inhaled it empty, overcoming his difficulty with the hot potato.

"Wenya takma pizzur?" he wanted to know, running a hand over his mouth.

"No use takin' yore picture till they find out about the labels. And how to pay for 'em." Hump Benders added that pointedly.

"And no use figgerin' on labels till yuh get the tin cans," said the astute young puncher at the end of the table.

"Does it take a heap of expensive machinery?" the single-minded Hump Benders demanded of Whopper.

The lean partner got out his plug-cut as he thought up an answer.

"All them minor details," he said offhandedly, "I'll explain later."

He motioned timorously that he wanted to stretch his legs. Grudgingly Poison Oakley got up and let him out. His bulk reared ceilingward, looming high over Whopper. He rubbed his fork-stabbed hand resentfully. He hunched and scowled, his moose-antler ears protruding redly, with hardly enough cranium showing above them to bother putting a hat on.

Poison Oakley was still riled and he wasn't making any hypocritical concealment of the fact. It didn't take a prophet to see that he was going to furnish Whopper with a flock of trouble.

But the young puncher with the greedy eyes was the one right now who deprived the partners of the peace of mind they had hoped to enjoy after a full and satisfying meal that made them feel much better.

"Them two freakish hosses out yonder in the corral—they yore'n?" he asked all at once.

"The bay-sorrel and the powder-blue roan?" Swap responded briskly.

"Yessir, them's our hosses. I see yuh got a eye for fine hossflesh."

Flattering admiration was evidently not the idea in the other's mind.

"Hope they get along peaceable with that old red bull Pizen brung in and penned up with 'em," he said.

Whopper rushed out, followed by Swap, who seized the opportunity to gust:

"Yuh spread that gravy talk purty thick! Don't yuh say we better vamoose away from here before complications set in?"

NOW that he was being pinned down to technical details of the canning trade of which he was utterly ignorant, Whopper shared the urge to clear out. But it immediately developed that their departure would not be as simple as they wished. At the gate bars, they were confronted by the old red bull. Massive and ugly, it lowered its curly-polled head and snorted up dust as it rumbled a challenge. Whopper, about to climb the gate bars, hopped back as it made a short rush, swiping at him with short, sharp horns.

"Mebbe you'd like to step inside and bring out the hosses," he suggested feebly.

"How about turnin' the bull loose?"

Whopper craned around warily. He saw Poison Oakley glowering at them from the cookshack doorway. He tried to inflate himself with unconcern.

"I reckon we ain't in no hurry," he said loudly, taking a seat on the stump where they had first encountered Hump Benders.

Swap perched nervously beside him.

"How long," he asked uncomfortably, "d'yuh think it'll take these Bull Creek citizens to find out that yore tin-can gravy scheme was only a dodge to get us inside that cookshack?"

Whopper stiffened with injured dignity.

"Jest because it come to me sudden ain't no sign it's a empty dream," he said. "Fact is, it might pay for us to remain around and make some easy money."

Swap groaned dismally.

"Migosh, d'yuh believe yore own lies?"

"Somebody's got to. If things go right, Bull Creek gravy will be as famous as California oranges, or Missouri mules, or Kansas grasshoppers. Yessir, this here's a land o' opportunity in the raw. With my brains workin' good—"

His confident assertions trailed off because the crowd in the cookshack was emerging now. The young puncher with an eye for fine horseflesh was approaching them.

"Down in the valley," he began, "I hear there's a cannery outfit that's closed down. On account of no work this season."

Whopper took the bait.

"S'pose we could get the loan of that cannery?"

The young puncher cast one eye into the corral.

"I might arrange it," he said. "That is, if I was offered a little inducement."

"Such as what?" countered Swap in his best bargaining manner.

"I never did own a bay-sorrel hoss," he said, and added broad-mindedly: "Although I think powder-blue is a real nice color."

"What's to prevent us from dealin' direct with that cannery outfit, ourownselves?"

"For one thing, yuh don't know where it's located. And for another thing"—the puncher spoke with malicious satisfaction—"Pizen Oakley don't intend for you gents to go nowhere. Not until he's made up his peanut mind about how he'll git even for that misfortunate accident to his paw."

The partners flung forlorn glances at their impounded mounts.

"What for did Mister Oakley bring

that cussed bull in the corral for?" Swap fretted.

"He rassles with it every day. Started when it was a little old calf."

Whopper sized up the bull with new approval.

"Any likelihood of the bull winnin'?" he asked hopefully.

"All I know is, Pizen complains that it don't pervide him with enough exercise. He's lookin' around for a bigger and meaner bull."

HUMP BENDERS straggled over to the corral as Whopper digested this cheerless information.

"Corky," he said to the young puncher, "you and the other boys is hazin' in some gravy beef this afternoon."

"Mr. Benders," Swap said hurriedly, "I been thinkin' me and my pardner had better make a careful survey of the gravy situation before we—"

"I been a-thinkin', too," Hump Benders said positively, "and I've made up my mind to have a whirl at the

business. Here's my proposition—I furnish the gravy and you fellers furnish the tin-cans. We'll go halvers." He turned away with an air of finality that seemed sinister.

The young puncher leered and nudged Swap in the ribs.

"I can also use the saddle on that bay-sorrel," he said. "I'll light out immediate for that cannery. Yuh better decide sudden."

Dickering was Swap's strong point. He was a born horse trader. But this proposition was disastrously one-sided.

The bay-sorrel was his most prized possession. Any rodeo or circus would pay big money for an animal with that freakish coloring—a bright silver-sorrel tail and the shiny black mane of a bay.

"The boss, he'll start slaughterin' first thing in the mornin'," the young puncher reminded him. "So's the cook can grind up the carcasses and pitch into production. I reckon he'll be sort o' put out if yuh ain't got any tin-cans on hand."

"Reckon we better accept yore proposition," Whopper agreed sadly.

Swap's shiny, round face went stricken.

"No sir!" he cried. "Anyhow, not without somethin' to boot!"

"I'll throw a kodak in on the deal," Corky offered generously.

"A kodak? Not much!"

Poison Oakley was swaggering toward them.

"The boss is the only one that's got any influence with Pizen," the young puncher said off-handedly. "Pizen gets awful riled when anybody don't keep up their end of a bargain with the boss. Figger it out for yoreselves."

Swap figured fast as Poison Oakley approached. The tophand looked bigger and meaner than he had inside the cookshack.

"It's a old kodak, and it's in the dunnage bag under my bunk," said the young puncher. "If I start now, I should ought to have the cannery rattlin' up here by mornin'."

"How about the powder-blue roan?" Swap appealed.

The young puncher shook his head.

"Then I'll ride along down into the valley with yuh!"

He shook his head again.

"I prefer to ride alone."

"All right, get started," moaned Swap. "But if yuh fail to produce a cannery, I get the bay-sorrel back, savvy?"

The young puncher hitched up his belt and grinned.

"Help yoreself to the kodak," he said.

CHAPTER III

King of Cartilage

JUST how Corky intended to get the bay-sorrel past the bull and out of the corral was what interested Whopper now. The formidable problem solved itself as Poison Oakley squeezed between the corral bars and advanced on the bull.

The bull's mood instantly changed. Its sturdy legs went wobbly. The curly hair on its massive forehead seemed to unkink and stand on end. With a bawl of fright, it turned and ran. Poison Oakley set his tonnage in motion and pursued it.

The young puncher scuttled into the corral and emerged with Swap's horse, mounted, and waved a cheery farewell.

On his ninth lap around the corral after the fleeing bull, Poison Oakley puffed to a halt as Hump Benders appeared again and yelled crankily:

"Quit that foolin' and get tuh work! Bring in that gravy stock, so's we can whang 'em and hang 'em and skin 'em!"

Grumblingly, Oakley emerged from the corral. He lumbered toward Whopper, who still slumped dejectedly on the stump. Swap was scurrying toward the bunkhouse. He found the kodak, a dilapidated, box-shaped affair, and emerged with it in time to witness a stirring scene.

Poison Oakley had the ax. He was chasing Whopper around the stump, uttering ferocious whoops. He made a swipe that converted Whopper's jumper jacket into a fashionable facsimile of a forked-tail dress coat.

Hump Benders had gone off somewhere else.

"Help!" screeched Whopper, just one jump ahead of the land-locked whale with the axe.

A carcass like Whopper's wouldn't be useful in a gravy cannery. More useful demands awaited that mended ax handle, when the Bull Creek beef was rounded up. Valiantly Swap raced to the rescue.

"Hold on, Mr. Oakley!" he yammered. "Stop! Hold that pose!"

Poison Oakley saw the kodak and braked to a stop. He faced the little partner, eyes glued on the lens hard enough to break it. He folded his brawny arms, holding the ax lightly.

"Look pleasant, Mr. Oakley!" Swap chirped. "Get to thinkin' about something nice, like gravy!"

Poison Oakley contorted his doltish countenance into what he thought a model for a tin-can label should look like.

The camera snicked.

Then Poison relaxed, spit on his hands, got a fresh hold on the ax and turned to spot Whopper, who had reeled dizzily to the side of the corral and flopped in the shade.

"Don't rush off!" jabbered Swap. "Let's take another!"

"What's wrong with that one we got?" boomed Poison Oakley.

"I—I jest want to make shore we got a good one!"

"And I want to make shore I give that gibberin' kangaroo a good lesson in table manners!"

"Please d-don't cut him up!" begged Swap.

"Why not?"

Swap ransacked his mind for some convincing argument.

"W-we need his brains to make the country gravy-conscious!"

"What's his whiskers got to do with his brains?"

"D-did yuh say wh-whiskers?"

"Yeah, whiskers! I was just aimin' to give him a shave!"

There was no denying that Whopper needed a shave. But a roughly playful grooming at the hands of Poison Oakley was not the sort of service that attracted him.

Swap ran out of arguments and let the kodak sag to his shivering knees. Poison Oakley headed for

Whopper who staggered shakily to his feet and inflated himself for another shrill appeal for help.

Just then Hump Benders emerged from a sod-roofed dugout beside the cookshack, carrying something that looked like a meat grinder, and Whopper gallivanted in his direction.

With a grunt of disappointment, Poison Oakley sank the ax into the stump and lumbered off toward a tall gray that dragged its reins as it nibbled grass. His fun spoiled, he heaved himself clear of the ground into creaking saddle and rode off to round up raw material for the epochal beginning of the gravy industry.

The cook came out.

"I need a chore hand," he told the boss.

"What for?"

"To fill up the woodbox and lug in some water."

Hump Benders handed the meat grinder to the unnerved Whopper.

"Yuh're it," he stated.

"And while yuh're at it," ordered the cook, "don't forget there's a stack of dirty dishes in here, waitin' to be washed!"

Clutching the life-saving kodak under one arm like some potent talisman of Fate, Swap legged it over to his dismayed partner. The King of Cartilage was in a mood to abdicate. He held out the grinder coaxingly.

"Ain't yuh goin' to help me start in from the ground up in this new business?" he pleaded.

"And deprive myself of seein' you work for the first time ever?" gloated Swap. "No, sir, I ain't! Yuh got us into this, Whopper Whaley! Now proceed to get us out!"

"We promised to stick together, through thick and thin!"

"That was before yuh spread that gravy talk on so thick!"

"I jest grabbed at the chance to put us on our feet!"

The remark brought up an unhappy reminder.

"Yuh put me on my feet, all right, by losin' me a valuable hoss! I got my feet on the ground, but I don't aim to stand hock-deep in groundup!"

"Quit palaverin' and get busy!" the cook yelled out.

Whopper threw a cud of tobacco discouragedly to the dust and shouldered his duties. . . .

Poison Oakley and the rest of the outfit returned at evening, close-herding a leathery collection of mossy-horns that bore the Bull Creek brand. Hugging the kodak like a good luck charm, Swap saw the gravy stock corraled.

When the gate bars were up, the giant tophand swung down beside him.

"What happened to Corkscrew?" he demanded.

"Wh-who?"

"That mink-eyed cowhand that didn't show up at roundup!"

"That young jasper that jiggered me out of a hoss? The one called Corky?"

"Yeah, him! Corkscrew Shader!"

"He—he went down in the valley to round up a cannery."

"What valley?"

"He didn't say!"

"What cannery?" Poison Oakley demanded, his voice raising. "I never heard about no cannery!"

HUMP BENDERS was attracted by the loud talk.

"This sawed-off biscuit-grabber says Corkscrew took his hoss and went out cannery-huntin'!" shouted Poison Oakley.

Hump Benders shrugged, vacant-eyed.

"First I knowed about it. And I don't know about no cannery hereabouts."

Dark foreboding overwhelmed Swap. The worst could be expected from a man named "Corkscrew."

"D'yuh reckon that cuss crooked me out of my hoss?" he wailed. "And has cleared out?"

Hump Benders shrugged again.

"He's a little bit crooked, Corkscrew is. Tricky sort."

"If yuh didn't know he had a cannery lined up, what for did yuh rush in this gravy beef?" Swap cried wildly.

"I figgered we'd use up them tincans on the dump, like he spoke of."

"Where's the slab-sided pelican that started all this?" Poison Oakley demanded impulsively.

Swap pointed the kodak.

"Hold it, Mr. Oakley!" he yelped. "Let's get another picture!"

"Ain't them other two no good?"

"They don't show yuh at yore best! Look cheerful, Mr. Oakley!"

Again the massive curmudgeon strained his countenance, and the kodak snicked and he forgot for the moment the need to thresh out affairs with Whopper, who had retired to a prepared position in the dug-out.

He didn't emerge until Poison Oakley had finished supper, and had trudged off toward the bunkhouse. He made a timid appearance between dusk and lamplight time, wolfed down leftovers, hurried through his final chores and slipped out to the edge of a haystack where Swap was already comfortably bedded down.

"I'm goin' to catch up my roan and go where the sinister hand of Poison Oakley can't reach!" he declared, frantically starting to roll up his soogans.

"How about the canned gravy industry?" Swap asked caustically.

"I even lost my taste for gravy!"

"Another thing to consider is that yore hoss is still in the corral. And the corral's full o' bad-intentioned cattle."

"We got to stampede them cattle! It's the only way we can head off a unpleasant showdown!"

"I'm told that Poison Oakley, he's a light sleeper, with a heavy sense of responsibility. Jest the opposite to what you are, Whopper Whaley!"

Whopper slumped down with a stricken sigh.

"I was born before my time!" he grieved.

"Mr. Oakley, he'll correct that. I've about wore out this kodak savin' yore life."

Whopper brooded for an interval.

"Mebbe we can put the gravy up in bottles, like ketchup!" he proposed suddenly.

"A fine idea! Only there ain't a whole bottle in the gully. And anyhow, them mock mushrooms couldn't be shook out of a bottle. Some of 'em is a cross between a dumpling and a cow'c cud."

"I don't know where I ever got the misguided notion that Mr. Benders' cook made good gravy!"

"On account of we hadn't et for two days, mebbe."

"I shore wish we was off somewheres, starvin' to death peaceful!"

"If wishes was hosses, they'd be eatin' down this haystack! Now lie down and give yore brains and legs a rest. Yuh'll be needin' both tomorrow mornin'."

CHAPTER IV

A New Twist

WHOPPER wriggled under a blanket and unkinked himself, and the cares of the day soon dissolved in blissful snoring. It was interrupted all too soon with the coming of gray, cheerless dawn, sounds of activity in the corral, and the peevish outcry of the cook for wood and water.

Eluding that dull routine, Whopper sought out Hump Benders as soon as he stamped into his boots.

"We better hold up everything till I can send away for some labels," he proposed energetically.

"We can the gravy and stick the labels on afterwards," Hump Benders stated. "The boys, they're rarin' to work."

Hump Benders had already demonstrated that when he got hold of a

notion he didn't let go. Whopper had reached the end of his rope. There was nothing to do now but to admit his miserable shortcomings as a surplus engineer and pray for a shortage of gravy.

"Mr. Benders," he gulped, "I crave to dissolve our business relations. Yuh see, I been travelin' for my health, and I feel a need for a long, fast trip comin' on. I—"

A hubbub of voices, hoofs and cattle plaints came from the corral before Whopper could finish his confession. Both of them whirled. The Bull Creek punchers were hanging on the gate bars. Inside, pursuing the old red bull, Poison Oakley was getting his morning setting-up exercise.

With an impatient mutter, Hump Benders headed for the corral to stop the time-wasting nonsense. Whopper was left alone with his thoughts. And as he sought some consoling one, he whiffed gravy. He looked toward the cookshack. The cook was stirring a skilletful.

Like some divine revelation, a solution to his problem came. He brightened as the coming dawn rayed the morning sky with the brave new day. He galloped for the cookshack. He tore inside. He hurled the astounded cook aside. He seized the skilletful of burbling gravy.

He spun around and streaked for the corral.

He reached the gate just as the bull, bawling surrender, backed away from Poison Oakley. That master of the science of bull-throwing advanced at a crouch, his powerful arms hooked out like the claws of a gigantic crab.

Whopper held the steaming skillet poised. He aimed and prayed and swooshed it.

A roar that shook him inside was the instant response. He looked, hardly able to believe the luck that had guided his hand.

The bull's terminal facilities were drenched with hot gravy. Globs of

(Continued on Page 108)

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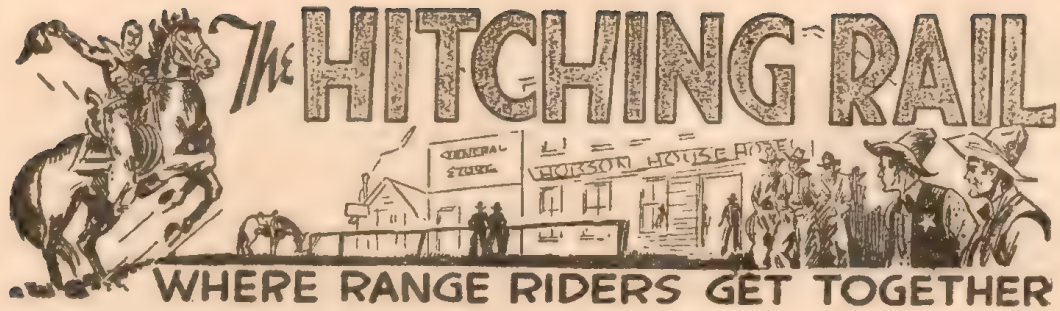

WELL, folks, sometimes we gits, here in our offis, a letter what sorta stirs up ol' mem'ries o' other places an' times, an' sech letters is right pleasant both tuh receive an' answer. While this yere ain't no travel-tour establishmint, we likes tuh give folks what they asks fer, so yere goes.

Charlie Fleming an' his pretty young bride are plannin' travelin' in their autymobile from New Hampshire, where's all them lakes an' pretty mountains, plumb out intuh our cow country, huntin' sight-seein' spots. An' they've writ in askin' what I think is th' most picturesque of all Injun pueblos I've seen durin' my hundred years or more o' straddlin' a saddle an' pushin' my bronc over western trails.

That's some question, folks, believe me, but I gotta answer 'em nice. They've done loaded their house-trailer an' wanta start movin', waitin' on me tuh tell 'em where to head for. Makes me git honin' tuh fork my old strawberry roan onct more an' go along with 'em.

It's durned tough tuh pick out jest one pueblo ag'in another, but still I reckon I gotta do it for 'em; an' it'll mebbe interest all o' yuh.

The Village of Taos

Well, I'm pickin' Charlie an' his bride a pueblo in New Mexico—that grand state o' scenery an' hist'ry. I'm tellin' 'em point yore gun at th' village o' Taos, what's 'bout a hundred miles north o' Santa Fe.

An' yere's why, folks. Onct in Santa Fe yuh'll never want tuh leave, but yuh gotta ef yuh mean tuh hit Taos. After leavin' Santa Fe, yuh rides through th' famous Palo Flechado Pass where a dandy autymobile road leads to an' over th' Sangre de Cristo Range. Then yuh gits tuh Taos, one o' th' oldest towns in all th' West an' packed with Injun an' White an' Conquistadore hist'ry tuh a fare-yuh-well.

Jess Tolman, Dude Chaney an' me, years ago, rode thataway with a herd o' longhorns an' shore had a swell adventure on th' way—many a one, tuh tell th' truth.

We shore growed intuh rawhide that time, from heads tuh cowboy boots, an' slung a mean gun. We was all young then an' plumb spunky an' rarin' tuh go.

Jess is ranchin' not ten miles from where I spends a heap o' time, an' reckon he still remembers time him an' me hadda ride one o' them durned longhorns 'crost a river when th' herd done jammed our broncs under water ten foot deep. I hung ontuh them longhorns while Jess he kept twistin' th' steer's tail tuh keep 'im swimmin', an' both of us cussin' aplenty fancy. An' when we struck Taos that time an' seen th' first human in miles, she war an old Apache squaw what give us a tin-can full o' warm goat's milk! An' both of us soaked hombres honin' a drink blazin' with geniwine flame!

Jess he took one swaller, grunted, spat, then passed me th' can an' poked his gun ag'in my ribs, orderin' me tuh drink th' rest; an' I been buttin' fence posts ever since.

Artist Folks

But tuh git tellin' yuh, Charlie an' yore pretty bride, 'bout Taos. Durin' th' past twenty year or so, Taos has become world famous fer its American an' Injun artists, who live there in a community like nothin' else in all our country. Them artists dresses fancy an' make yore orbs stick out seein' 'em, but they're plenty nice tuh strangers, an' when they seen Jess Tolman, Dude Chaney an' me, out come their real bottles an' our welcome thrived far intuh that grand noche.

Jess wanted tuh paint one gal's picture—an' him never drawin' nothin' but cow brands! That war after his fourth swig outa that bottle.

Well, about Taos. It is really three pueblos 'stead o' jest one. It's got twin communal dwellin's of Injun pueblo style—story on story with ladders leadin' up. Each five stories high, too, of adobe.

Th' Taos Injuns lives in 'em today jest as they did a thousand year ago, leadin' th' same life. Th' Mission o' San Geronimo's there, wuth seein' tuh anybody's eyes, an' as ancient. Them Pueblo Injuns ain't th' lazy sort. They're th' most progressive Redskins today.

Hist'ry Writ in Blood

But th' hist'ry of Taos is shore writ in blood. Pepe, th' Injun leader back in 1680, headed a great uprisin' an' killed most all white inhabitants, mostly Spaniards an' their priests. In 1692 De Vargas rode in with his men and whipped hell outa them Redskins.

De Vargas fought there ag'in in 1692 an' forced th' Injuns tuh scatter back intuh their hills. But in 1696 they sneaked in an' murdered all th' priests an' some twenty-five white folks; an' besides this, th' Pueblos was always scrappin' th' other tribes, th' Utes an' Comanches.

After New Mexico become part o' th' U. S. A., Mexicans in Taos rose up hostile as all gitout ag'in us an' in 1847 they murdered Gov'ner Charles Bent in his sleep an' killed a lotta other Americans in a hard battle at Turley's Mills. But Colonel Sterlin' Price of th' United States Army, a distant ancestor o' mine, rode in with three hundred cavalrymen, assaulted the Mission what was jammed with them Pueblo Injuns an' killed more'n a hundred an' fifty Redskins in th' fight. Fifteen o' their leaders was publicly hung as a warnin'.

Another uprisin' 'most come in 1910, but war forestalled by th' fast action of th' New Mexico militia. That's how come I says th' hist'ry o' Taos was shore writ in blood. An' right there in Taos lies th' two graves of old Kit Carson an' his wife.

Home of the Penitentes

Taos is also th' home of th' "Penitentes," one o' th' strangest religious Injun sects ever was. They have their own churches, called "Morados," scattered all through them old hills, hidden in out-o'-th'-way canyons where they conduct their weird rites. Self torture by lashin's with whips what's made outa cactus spines!

Well, Charlie an' Mary, that's 'bout all th' space we kin give yuh on plannin' yore trip. But from Taos yuh'll find a hundred dandy places to go to in that house-trailer o' yours, an' yuh'll feel yo're livin' in one o' th' most historical sections of our West, bar none.

Pawnee Bill, Frontiersman

Next letter's from William Buck Hammond, who hails from Louisiany th' land o' fancy polyticks an' Creole beauties what'd knock any hombre's heart plumb up intuh his thorax. Bill asks tuh know who war "Pawnee Bill."

Yuh're askin' 'bout a mighty famous frontiersman, William. I usta know 'im, back when he war runnin' his wild west show. He come from Oklahoma, war cowboy, Injun fighter an' all th' trimmin's. A law-abidin' hombre who'd face hell's own wildcats in pajamas, only I reckon Pawnee never owned a pair. Pawnee, Oklahoma, was his home.

His full name was Major Gordon W. Lillie. He usta be an Injun interpreter when jest a kid. Then he growed up tuh become a real leader in settlin' his State.

He organized an' run Pawnee Bill's "Wild West Show" after Buffalo Bill's famous "Congress of Rough Riders of the World" had played its last performance.

Pawnee Bill become president of th' "Highway 64" organization, owned the nationally knowed "Old Town Trading Post," an' he made hisself a fine part in th' hist'ry of Oklahomy. As fine a figger on a hoss as ever rode th' plains.

Th' Bar-X-Bar Ranch, near Pawnee, so clost tuh Pawnee Bill's home town, was one rendezvous of th' infamous Doolin

[*Turn Page*]

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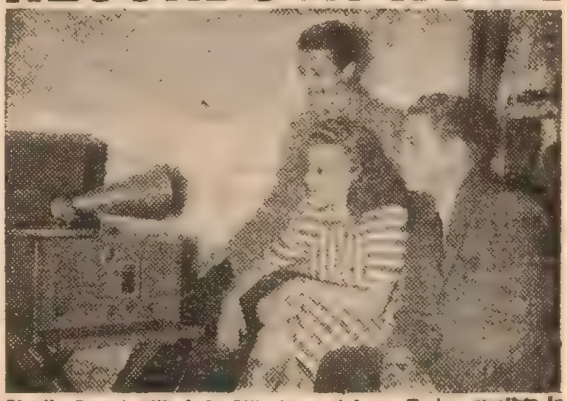

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gang o' outlaws. This gang tried robbin' two banks in th' same town, Coffeyville, Kansas, where th' Dalton gang made its last fight. After th' smoke cleared away, most of th' gang war dead, some run away an' some war captured.

She Savvies Cow Country

Now comes our next letter-writer an' she's shore plumb welcome — Miss Grace Moore o' Tucson, Arizony, my own State an' ain't no better on th' map.

I 'member times when us cowpokes rode down th' dusty streets uv Tucson ayellin' fer friendship an' waddie fun, coupla

Featured Next Issue

TEXAS RANGER DARING

A Walt Slade Novel

By BRADFORD SCOTT

•

WAGON WHEELS

An Exciting Novelet

By REEVE WALKER

•

THE EAGLES FLY HIGH

A Swap and Whopper Novelet

By SYL MacDOWELL

months' pay in our chaparejo pockits an' time all our own tuh spend as we liked, which same allers meant rompin' our broncs up an' down th' street, yellin' fer competitors tuh come on an' ride with us, then stalkin' inside th' first eatin' shack an' orderin' eight fried eggs turned over an' half pound o' bacon cooked crackly, with coupla gallons o' steamin' coffee an' coupla pies tuh wind up with afore we started 'round tuh take in th' sights o' civilization.

Reckon we'd not dast do any o' that these days. Youth's gone plumb different nowadays an' plenty folks cain't even spell th' word "hoss"! But Grace who writ us this fine letter ain't that kind. No, suh!

Way she sits her Myers saddle an' holds her reins on her palomino shows us she shore savvies cow country an' I only wish I was 'bout a hundred years younger so's I could borrer coupla hundred simoleons from our boss back yere an' sign up fer a month's leave, so's I could git down there tuh my old stampin' ground an' pop a speshul question tuh Grace before some long-haired buckaroo what don't know nuthin' kin drag her tuh th' altar an' crimp my chances. Her picture's fine an' dandy, an' we're thankin' yuh, Gracie.

An Old Cow Waddy Gets Around

Grace writes in tuh tell us she an' her dad's plannin' goin' out fer a sight o' San Francisco an' do I know th' place? Well, Gracie, an old cow waddy gits around, sorta.

Coupla fellas an' me was there one time, havin' took a train-load o' steers there from our old Diamond A what's in yore State. After deliverin' them cows, us fellas sorta sashayed around th' town, wantin' tuh see th' world.

We hired us fresh broncs an' rode through Golden Gate Park, what ain't no lovelier place, an' lamped th' gals ridin' bicycles them days in th' first "shorts" ever saw in public. We most went cross-eyed, starin'. Then we hit th' Cliff House out on th' beach an' seen them seals an' how they're fed with two-foot-long fishes what they swallered in one bite, bones an' all.

Sorta made us hombres jealous, us bein' only able tuh swaller bully beef an' spit out th' bones; an' we figgered them seals shore could swaller a gallon apiece o' Billy Boles' red-eye, what he shoves at us over th' bar in his Cowboys' Home saloon what's in Naco an' one swaller of which same'd make a human willin' tuh fight a den o' lions any time.

Th' Old Shell Game

But we got sorta friendly with three fellas out there on that beach who told us we was th' best lookin' men they'd seen in eleven years an' two months.

We was lookin' fer friends who knowed th' town an', 'course, met 'em halfway an' ordered th' drinks. Then they drags out three small, nice, shiny half shells from walnuts or some similar nut an' lays 'em out on a table in th' barroom, movin' 'em

[*Turn Page*]

Getting Up Nights Makes Many Feel Old

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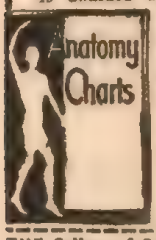

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around lazy like while we all sat there atellin' them fellas all about Arizony an' our loneliness.

One fella puts a li'l bean under one o' them shells an' says, smilin' nice, that he bet none of us could tell under which shell that durned bean was. One o' his pals chuckles, lifts up a shell an' there war that bean. It shore looked easy. Us fellas had saw 'bout all gamblin' games they is, but we'd never saw that one up tuh then. So, 'course, we three chuckle-heads laid down our wads.

Well, Gracie, we crawled a freight headed back fer Arizony late that night, cussin' beans like all hell-an'-gone an' busted flat. I ain't hardly been able tuh face one since, an' that's long years ago when us fellas was jest kids in our teens. So yuh see, I cain't advise yuh about that town, only, ef yuh go there an' yore old dad's human an' wants a flurry o' gaiety, better head 'im fer one o' them big hotels like th' St. Francis an' have 'im spend his dinero on grub an' never on beans from no man livin'.

Down in our Southwest we got what's called "Mexican jumpin' beans," allers fer sale in curio shops, an' them beans shore jump, but even with one o' them hoppin' on my old hatbrim I wouldn't bet a red cent they's a bean inside. Beans in a can are grand fer eatin', but beans under a shell ain't no man's friend, take it from me, gal.

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---

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 75

1. This custom carries over from chivalric times when a knight wore his sword at his left hip. Naturally, the knight mounted from the left side in order to avoid being impeded by the sword.

2. The Black Hills, South Dakota. The United States had deeded these hills to the Sioux in perpetuity, but when gold was discovered it was impossible to keep settlers out, and these settlers fought the Indians. The resulting enmities and outrages led to the great war with the Sioux Indians, during which the Custer massacre occurred.

3. Sitting Bull.

4. A notorious Mexican outlaw who led a number of raids into Texas, looting, killing and rustling, shortly after the Civil War. Ranger McNelly overtook and killed him in 1875.

5. A remuda is a string of saddle horses on a roundup.

th' top of th' column (on Page 113) an' come aridin' folks.

An' when yuh grabs up our next number yo're shore gonna let out a squeal o' delight from front cover tuh back.

Yuh cain't beat Bradford Scott an' Reeve Walker. They sure know their cow country. An' they're both in the next issue, among others.

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Reeve Walker's yarn is WAGON WHEELS, a novelet of a muleskinner's battle to clean up a town. An' Syl MacDowell will be here, too, with THE EAGLES FLY HIGH, in which Swap and Whopper will hand you plenty of laughs!

Then they's plenty more jest as fine an' dandy, upstandin' cowhands an' their fightin' gals of our ranges, what cain't be beat fer romance or courage no time.

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Until next time, *hola*, an' good luck tuh one an' all.

Buck Benson

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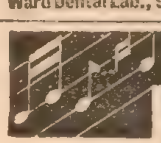

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THE LAST GROUNDUP

(Continued from Page 101)

mock mushrooms clung like steaming hot mustard-plasters.

New, outraged bellows boiled out of the bull as it charged, its fear turned to fury. Poison Oakley gawped bewilderedly. His grappling arms dropped. He uttered a hoarse yawp of fright, turned and fled.

The bull closed in the gap that separated them in two plunging, earth-jarring jumps. There was another reverberating jar that was felt mainly along the spinal column of Poison Oakley. He sailed up and forward. He crashed against the pole side of the corral. A section of it snapped off, level with the ground, and collapsed like wheat straws.

Here was an interesting use of a new product.

A photograph of Poison Oakley now would have exploited the potency of Bull Creek gravy in a weird but spectacular way. The bull was pawing the wreckage of the fence in search of the tophand, buried somehere underneath. The gravy herd observing the sudden collapse of the corral, like the miraculous cleaving of the waters of the Red Sea, poured out in thankful deliverance and headed for far ranges.

Whopper leaped the fence and reached the powder-blue roan.

SWAP woke up too late to play any part in what so swiftly followed, or to witness the ruse that led up to it. All he knew was that he lay in the path of a stampede. He dug in. No burrow-dwelling creature ever dug so fast. Hay flew. He got in and under the hay stack. He practically pulled it over him. A corn-borer would have turned green with envy. A boll weevil could have taken lessons. A timber beetle would have thrown up its file-like pincers in despair.

Swap didn't stop until he was secure from anything short of a cata-

clysmic upheaval of the universe. The thundering hoofs sounded dimly as they passed.

The problem now was getting out. Swap had roved dim wilderness trails and found his way through unerringly. But under here, in a realm familiar only to moles, field mice and gopher snakes, his sense of direction failed him. He clawed a labyrinth passage that dipped, twisted and turned like the secret passages that befuddle explorers in a Pharaoh's tomb.

Out in the corral, Whopper's long legs clamped the comforting contours of his own saddle. One look at the gate and he decided to abandon that usual means of exit. Hump Benders was clambering over the top bar with the ax in his hand.

Whopper reined the roan into the dust that billowed in the wake of the escaping cattle. The roan suddenly shied, reared and backed. Out of the gloom loomed the hulk of the old red bull. It was coming head down.

The roan fled back to the feed rack and around it, bit in its teeth. The bull, close behind, was eager to have it over with. They made a swift circuit of the feed rack. Then a weak yawp sounded from the wrecked fence. Poison Oakley emerged, blinking and shaking assorted corral particles out of his hair.

The bull returned to its first hate. Poison Oakley yawped again and then pulled poles over him. Hump Benders ran out with the ax, shouting. He ran back as the bull made a short side excursion in his direction.

The outfit, clinging to the gate bars, enjoyed the performance and continued to cling there. The cook joined them. Whopper heard betting going on. The bull, tossing poles off the heap that covered Poison Oakley with its horns, was a long favorite.

It appeared to Whopper, who glued himself to saddle and gazed in shuddering fascination, that the time

[Turn Page]

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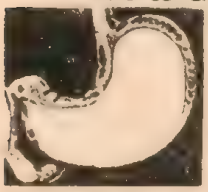

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would soon come when Poison Oakley would run out of pieces of fence to cover himself with. The bull frisked its blistered tail angrily and thundered. Splintered poles flew.

Whopper felt that he owed the bull friendly encouragement, even if it had given him a lively minute or two. But somewhere deep in his shiftless soul there was a small glimmer of bravery. He got hold of his throw-rope and loosened it and started to whirl a loop.

Shrill objections rose from the gate bars, where the bull's backers resented any interference. But pleasing everybody, Whopper had long since learned, was an impossibility. His loop widened. His throw snaked out. The roan was range-trained. It threw its weight against a tightening rope that had caught on one strong, curved horn.

The bull bawled and bucked. Poison Oakley got up and took off. With eyes blinded by dust, he didn't know where he ran until he collided with the haystack and dropped.

Whopper dallied his rope to an upright of the feed rack and made for the gate. Hump Benders had dropped the ax. That was a sign that he had stacked his bets on Poison Oakley.

THE roan cleared the gate. Whopper's instinct was to take for the open country. The roan shared the impulse. But it fetched up short as another rider, fancily-mounted, burst upon the scene from somewhere beyond the immediate vicinity.

Whopper found himself face to face with Corkscrew Shader, astride a sweaty and jaded bay-sorrel. Something that resembled discouragement dulled the young puncher's avaricious eye.

"Where's yore pardner?" he inquired.

"Don't know where I'm at myself!" croaked Whopper.

Hump Benders hurried up.

"What's up now?" he yelled.

"I want to give that little warthawg his hoss back," said Corkscrew. "Where—"

Something was happening over at the haystack. Poison Oakley, sitting in a dazed sprawl, blubbered and grabbed as something emerged from the loosened flakes at his feet.

The crowd by the corral hurried over to the new scene of excitement. Dimly recognizable, as hay fell away, was the round red face of Swap Bootle.

Poison Oakley's characteristic reaction to this unnecessary scare was to get riled.

"Why, yuh danged little mushroom-headed prairie dog!" he bellowed. "I'm going to ram yuh down so deep yuh never will come up again!"

He slammed down with a terrific wallop that Swap barely dodged. Before a second blow could fall, Swap shrieked:

"Hold it, Mr. Oakley!"

From somewhere, he produced the kodak. It had the usual hypnotizing effect on the monster tophand. He froze, face and sinew. Swap aimed it shakily and jiggered the thing that made it click. But the camera didn't click this time. He turned it and examined the back. Poison Oakley snatched it out of his hands. He stared at the kodak, pop-eyed.

When he found his voice, it rose to a volume that made the struggling bull over in the corral sound like a sweetly caroling songbird.

"It ain't loaded!" he erupted. "There ain't a speck o' film in it!"

"I—I can't help it, Mr. Oakley!" chirped Swap. "It—it's Corkscrew's camera!"

Poison Oakley rose in his wrath, beetling brow dark and flat as a gorilla's, his red, splay ears flattened back. He rushed for the young puncher, who slipped off the bay-sorrel and spurted for the cookshack and beyond. He dived into the sod-roofed

[*Turn Page*]

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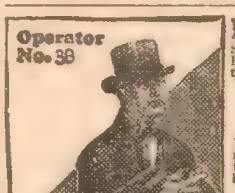

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State of New York } ss.:
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Thrilling Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc,, 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owners are: Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 22 West 48th Street New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. HERBERT, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 9th day of October, 1940. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1941.

dugout and pulled the heavy door shut behind him.

There was grub enough down there to last him till winter. By then, he hoped, Poison Oakley would be tired of waiting for him to come out.

Swap extricated himself completely from clinging hay. He uttered a glad cry as he saw and recognized the bay-sorrel. He ran to it and leaped to leather.

There was something in that run and leap and glad outcry that reminded the two horses of times past when a smoky getaway was called for. Without touch of rein or spur, they became two elongated blurs that moved with incredible speed across the Bull Creek landscape.

When the spread of Hump Benders had receded into safe distance, the partners reined down. Swap was still flabbergasted by their inexplicable deliverance.

"I reckon Corkscrew Shader didn't locate that cannery," he gusted, "or else he wouldn't of come back to Bull Creek and returned my hoss."

Whopper reached for his plugcut. He inspected it carefully, choosing a choice corner to gnaw off. He prolonged the selection, solemnly enjoying his little partner's quivering curiosity.

He finally spoke.

"Mr. Benders is a mighty lucky man. He's got a fortune there in that tough livestock o' his."

"Yuh mean Corkscrew *did* locate the cannery?" cried Swap.

"Well, in a way he did," Whopper deliberated, with a humorous gleam in his sun-squinty eyes. "Only it seems that Corkscrew didn't hear quite straight."

He paused to fang a chew, then finished.

"We got out o' that gravy deal on account of yore hoss deal, which I was smart enough to insist on. That cannery, Corkscrew said, it turned out to be a—tannery!"

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
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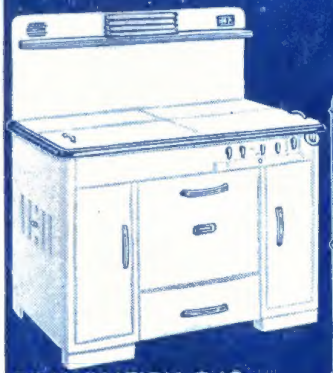

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